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MUSTANG MERLE'S FIGHT FOR LIFE.

BY MAJOR SAM S. SCOTT.



THE RED RIDER SCENTED THE DANGER IN THAT MAN'S PRESENCE. WAS IT CAPTAIN SILVERBELT THE OUTLAW?

Mustang Merle's Fight for Life;

OR,

Captain Silver Belt's Oath.

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("THE OLD MAJOR,")

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CHAPTER I.

CAPTAIN SILVER BELT'S THREAT.

NIGHT settling over a wide plain in the neighborhood of the Rio Tagus fell upon a solitary man who looked across the open and ever and anon stroked the arched neck of his steed.

The animal's flanks showed that he had been ridden hard and that despite the night, a long journey was still before him.

After awhile the horseman urged the horse on and in a short time was riding across the plain.

"They don't look for me at this hour," he mused. "They won't be expecting me and that's why I am coming back. I haven't crossed the steps of the famous ranch for months and I hardly think I will be a welcome visitor, but that don't make any difference to me. The boy is shrewd and cunning and has some true friends who stand by him through thick and thin. In the first place, there is the young Indian who has distinguished himself, and, then, we will have to meet the tall Yankee who is 'fight' to the backbone. They call him Joe Bundy, or 'Fighting Joe,' and one has to be careful when he is about."

It was not long before horse and man had vanished on the dark plain and the sound of hoofs was to be heard no longer.

By and by a night-hawk flew over the scene and then a stray wolf flitted across the gloomy landscape.

Presently there came from the direction by which the single rider had reached the plain another horseman who bent over the saddle and closely examined the ground.

Was he tracking the first person?

The second rider differed greatly in looks from the other.

He was an Indian, as one could have told at once by the keen eye he carried in his head. He wore no distinguishing traits, not a feather nor a head-dress of any kind, but for all this he looked the Indian he was and sat the saddle like one born to it.

He seemed to discover on the ground the trail for which he sought and all at once sprung from the saddle and put his dark face close to the few spears of grass that tried to thrive on that barren spot.

"He has passed," muttered the Indian trailer, looking up as though some one was near to hear him. "He has not been gone long and Red Hawk finds the trail fresh."

Once more he was in the saddle and the lithe steed that carried him was again moving swiftly across the plain.

Far ahead the white man, who looked like a brigand of the plains, was riding at a fast gallop, taking in every thing that met his eye, and now and then speaking kindly to the beast he strode.

The Indian looked no longer at the trail at his feet as if he knew exactly where it led, but rode on and on until he reached a clump of thorn trees—the only things that would throw a shadow on the plain when the sun came up.

Here he seemed to wait for some one, with his face turned toward the East, but after awhile he grew impatient and rode on once more.

Daylight came and found the red-skin far from the edge of the wide waste. The plain was behind him and he had reached a wooded country as one could tell by the little stream that ran through it like a line of molten silver.

He shaded his eyes against the strong light of day and looked far and long across the scene before him.

To his left rose a line of hills that had a hazy look; he could make out another line in his right, but they were not even hazy, and nearer still ran the stream through which he had just ridden.

All at once something came in sight that caught the keen eye of the red-skin spy-trailer.

It moved like a horse and his rider, and the longer the Indian looked the greater grew his curiosity.

The object regarded with so much interest

came closer, and when the Indian saw that it was a man riding slowly over the open line of landscape, he dropped from the saddle and crouched on the ground. His steed at a touch from his hand followed his example and the clump of thorns sheltered both. The red rider scented the danger in that man's presence. Was it Captain Silver Belt, the Outlaw?

Larger and larger grew the object on the plain, and suddenly the Indian, watching like a lynx, sprung to his feet; his horse at once did likewise; into the saddle the red-skin vaulted, and in a moment more was bounding over the plain in sharp pursuit.

It was like the bounding of a lynx from its lair—Red Hawk swooping down upon his prey.

At first he was not noticed, but when the rider of the other steed caught sight of him, he drew rein and regarded him for a moment.

The young Apache did not check his onward sweep, but kept on toward the single watcher who, curiously enough, had not drawn a weapon, but sat like one spellbound in the saddle.

Red Hawk rode on until a hand was thrown up and a voice clear and ringing came to the red rider.

In an instant Indian and steed became statues on the ground.

"You are near enough," cried the white man. "I will talk to you at that distance. What do you want?"

The Indian leaned forward and scanned the face before him.

"What do you want, I say?"

"Red Hawk wants to talk."

"To me?"

"To Captain Silver Belt."

"Ha, you know me, do you?"

"Red Hawk knows all who ride the plains."

"By Jove, I guess you do!" and the speaker laughed.

There was no reply and the seconds seemed to grow into hours between the pair so strangely met.

"When is Captain Silver Belt coming?" asked the Indian, breaking the silence.

"What do you mean?"

"Captain Silver Belt knows," was the answer. "He is coming to the boy miner's ranch; he has told his men that he would lead them some day to the home of Merle, the Rancher, and show them how much wealth it held. When is he coming?"

Captain Silver Belt, the most noted brigand of that wild region, scowled darkly and scanned the young red-skin sharply.

"What is it to you when I carry out my design?" he exclaimed. "You would better go back and prepare for the swoop."

"You are coming, then?"

"Yes!"

The next moment the Indian was riding straight at the bandit of the border.

"Stand off!" cried Captain Silver Belt, throwing one hand toward the pistols in the holster. "You ought to know the old saying:

He who fights and runs away
Will live to fight another day:
But he who on the field is slain
Will never live to fight again."

The young Indian did not seem to heed the advice contained in the lightly quoted lines, but came on even as he saw the bandit draw the silver-mounted pistol.

But, suddenly, Red Hawk threw himself under his horse's neck and uttered a derisive laugh. "I can kill your horse," cried Captain Silver Belt. "You have cheated death a good many times—you and your pard, the lank Yankee; but this campaign will be your last. We are going to mark every herd in this country with the dagger brand of Captain Silver Belt, and if their owners interfere, by heavens! we'll make them carry the same brand; you hear, you copper-skin spy?"

The young Indian suddenly wheeled his steed and straightened in the saddle.

"To mark one steer belonging to Mesquite Ranch is to die the death of the wounded wolf," he answered proudly. "Captain Silver Belt, you may threaten but you will never do what you say. The boy's ranch is yonder, beyond the hills; you know the trail to it. The cattle wear Mustang Merle's brand and woe to the hand that touches them with another mark! It is Red Hawk who says it!"

"All right!" laughed the brigand, and waving his hand at the young Apache who was riding away he sent up a shout of defiance that seemed to fill Red Hawk's eyes with sparks of fire.

"He thinks I don't intend to carry out my

threat," he said to himself. "He thinks I won't attempt to mark the Boy Rancher's steers. I swear that within twenty-four hours they shall bear the dagger brand of Captain Silver Belt. I am here for that purpose and no one has ever yet balked me."

With this he watched the lone Indian for a spell and turning his horse's head, rode on once more.

When he looked back again the Indian had vanished and the waste had no living person upon it but himself.

As for Red Hawk, he galloped on until he had passed the hills, when he came in sight of a lovely ranch lying in a fertile valley. Everything denoted care and wealth, and here and there on the rich hillsides hundreds of cattle were grazing, the whole forming a grand sight for the eye.

Red Hawk watched this scene for a little while; then, urging his horse forward, he rode down the hill and neared the ranch.

Presently a dog ran out to meet him and he drew rein in front of a porch where he was greeted by the young owner of the place, Mustang Merle, whose name was known all over that region.

"Whar Joe?" asked the Indian.

"Always on deck," and the lank figure of a man came forward and touched his hat to the red-skin.

"I have seen him, Joe. He says he is going to mark the young master's steers and—"

"That's good news! I wish he would; I'm just sp'ilin' for a ruction. It won't do for the Bundys to rust out," and the old fellow showed his teeth in a smile as he turned to the Boy Rancher on the porch.

CHAPTER II.

THE EMPTY STAGE.

As a matter of course the mad threat of Captain Silver Belt occasioned some excitement at the ranch.

The Dagger Brand had become famous throughout the region and he had placed it upon hundreds of cattle not his own.

Mustang Merle had on several previous occasions been told that his cattle had been marked by the bandit, but this was the first time Captain Silver Belt had sent word direct.

For some time the three sat on the porch and talked over the tidings brought by the young Indian. Mesquite had passed through several hot times, but it was quite ready for another, for, in truth, as Old Joe remarked, a "ruction was a-brewing."

Mustang Merle sat quietly and listened to all that was said.

"I wish now that the young people were not coming at this juncture," he said.

"They ought to be here now, eh?" asked Old Joe.

"Yes. I have been thinking of sending out an escort for them."

"Toward Tagus City?"

Mustang Merle nodded.

"Shall we go—Red Hawk and I?"

"I was going myself; I think that would be better, and, then, you see I am very anxious to welcome Olive who has never been to this country."

"Let Red Hawk go!" suddenly cried the Indian. "His horse is fresh, and, then, he wants to go back over the plain to look after the Man of the Silver Belt."

Ten minutes later the Indian was riding back over the route he had traversed during the night, and Joe Bundy and Mustang Merle were alone on the porch.

"We are on the edge of the cloud," the latter said. "We are going to have more trouble with this man than with all the rest of our foes. He is merciless and will attempt to carry out his threat to the very last letter. Why? Here is the secret, Joe."

Long Joe leaned toward the Boy Rancher and was all attention.

"He used to be a friend of Captain Red Jacket, our old-time enemy. I know this to be a fact, and the death of that rascal has set hard on Captain Silver Belt. He has as desperate a set of men at his back as ever filled a saddle; they are ready to follow him through fire and blood; but if he leaves his accursed mark upon one of my cattle, I will hunt him down and take vengeance, I care not what stands between me and my desire."

"Of course the last of the Bundys is with you, as of old," was the reply.

"I knew that beforehand, Joe," said Merle.

The Yankee scout arose and paced the porch.

"What if he should take a notion to intercept the young folks?" he suddenly asked.

The sudden flushing of Merle's face told that he had been thinking of the same thing.

"They are liable to get to Tagus 'most any time. They will be alone, and if no one is there to receive them, and Captain Silver Belt happens to discover where they are bound, he might take a notion to give them trouble."

"You are right, Joe. Red Hawk has ridden in the direction of Tagus, but that isn't enough."

"It's not enough for me, either," cried the old scout. "I have never seen the young folks, mind you, captain, but I am their friend all the same, and I don't want to have them intercepted by such a curse as Captain Silver Belt."

For some time the two friends remained on the porch, and when they left it Joe Bundy quitted the house and moved toward the stables.

There he found a roan, which he saddled at once and rode forth.

"I'll ride down to Tagus and wait for the guests of the ranch," said he.

In a little while he was riding across the country, and when the sun turned to go down the western field of the sky, he rode into the border town known far and wide as Tagus City.

Joe Bundy was no stranger there. Everybody knew that he was attached to Mustang Merle's ranch, that he had helped in the war with Captain Red Jacket and Dolores Dick; and there were some in the town who had seen his courage tried on more than one occasion.

Old Joe rode straight to the hotel and inquired there if the coach had arrived from the west.

He was told that it had not come, when he walked out and lighting a cigar, began to smoke on the porch.

Presently some one came rushing up to the building and cried out that the coach team was tearing along toward the town, with the coach upset and the horses rushing like mad steeds.

Joe nearly bit the cigar in two and the next moment found himself rushing toward the edge of the town whither others no less excited were moving as rapidly.

It did not take the runaway team long to come up in a cloud of dust, and in a jiffy the horses were stopped by stalwart hands and the coach righted.

It was found to be empty, but there rolled into the road a package which Old Joe caught up and eyed with manifest curiosity.

"By heavens! they were passengers!" he cried. "This belonged to the girl and—I'm off like a pot-leg!"

The sudden departure of the Yankee was a surprise to those who saw him ride away, and when he had vanished they wondered what had taken him off at such speed.

The old scout followed the back trail of the coach without much difficulty. He could see where the maddened horses had dragged the overturned vehicle which was on its tri-weekly trip from the west, and not one of the many signs in the trail escaped his eye.

On, on went Joe Bundy.

All at once he turned down a narrow road which seemed to lead into the heart of the hills that bounded Tagus City on the west and disappeared.

He had discovered that the horses had come out of the hills and when he had reached them he again fell back and looked ahead.

A man had risen in the trail before him!

There he sat on the back of a black horse and in his hands looking over the saddle, was a Winchester which stared the old scout in the face.

"That's right. You know when to halt," said a voice which came over the leveled weapon. "I guess you have gone far enough, and if you know what's good for the last of the Bundys, you'll go back without further argument."

Despite the threat poorly concealed in these words, the old fellow grinned.

"I never mince words. Go back or remain where you are!"

Old Joe's hand seemed to tighten on the reins they held.

"What have you done with them?" he asked.

The answer he received was a laugh.

"That's your business, eh?" cried the tall scout.

"You are right; it is mine and mine alone."

"But you are not Captain Silver Belt?"

"I should say I wasn't."

"I can see that, for I have had the pleasure of gazing into the face of that villain—"

"Have a care! He may be my captain."

"I don't doubt that," said Old Joe. "But you don't seem to want to tell me what has become of the two young passengers in the stage."

"Didn't you find 'em when the stage struck the city?"

"You know we did not."

"It was somewhat of a surprise, wasn't it?" Old Joe ground his teeth.

"I want to say this: You sha'n't play the game you have inaugurated. We understand your tactics and they won't wash. If you harm one hair of the heads of the young folks—"

"Mustang Merle's would-be guests, eh?"

"Yes. I say that if you harm them in the least, you will wish you had never heard of the Boy Rancher of the Southwest."

"What does he pay you to boast?" was the reply.

"You may have killed Captain Red Jacket and Dolores Dick, but you can't play the winning hand against Captain Silver Belt. That boy has lorded it over this region long enough; he has played winner long enough. We are tired of hearing of thousands of cattle on almost as many hills, and we don't intend to let him play border czar any longer. Yes, I belong to Captain Silver Belt's band. I am Gilded Gid. Go back and tell your master that the young guests have fallen into good hands—that the girl is as pretty as a peach and the boy a good looker and full of nerve. We may make him one of us before we quit, and the girl will become our queen, and ride at the head of the Black Feathers of the Border."

It is needless to say that such words made the blood of the old Yankee fairly boil in his veins.

"That's equal to a declaration of war!" cried Joe.

"Just as you like," was the cool rejoinder. "Here, take my card with you," and the man drew from his bosom a stout bit of pasteboard, upon which he scrawled the name he had given Joe, along with two crossed daggers—the brand of Captain Silver Belt—and then flipped it toward the old scout.

It fluttered through the air and fell at the feet of Bundy's horse.

The next moment the speaker turned and rode off, but in a flash he was called to a halt by the Boy Rancher's ally.

"Look out! I'm comin'!" cried Old Joe, and then he was seen coming down upon the brigand like a thunderbolt.

Up went the Winchester once more, but Old Joe dropped alongside of his steed and kept on.

"Curse him, he's more than half-Injun in tactics!" growled the outlaw, and then he fired at Joe, but missed.

CHAPTER III.

THE STAMPEDE'S SWOOP.

NOTHING could stop the wild Yankee, who was at home in the saddle, and Gilded Gid was not long discovering this.

The smoke of his rifle had barely lifted when he found Old Joe alongside, and the next moment the hand of the Boy Rancher's friend had him by the throat, and was bearing him back at the risk of choking him to death.

The struggle did not last long, for the old scout was too much for Gilded Gid, and the latter, held by a grip of iron, was soon going back toward the town.

This did not trouble him very much, as he was well known there, and Captain Silver Belt had many friends among the toughs of Tagus.

Joe released his captive enough to let him talk if he wished to; but Gilded Gid relapsed into silence, and in this manner the two rode on.

When they came in sight of Tagus City, the eyes of the bandit brightened, and he looked at Old Joe.

"Think you're getting near friends, eh?" queried the scout of the border. "I reckon they do think a good deal of your kind in Tagus; but they may not have the best of opinion of the rifling of the stage."

Old Joe kept on until he was seen by the toughs of Tagus, and when he appeared on the little Plaza with his captive, he was the cynosure of all eyes.

Gilded Gid looked over the crowd by which he was immediately surrounded, and several met his gaze with a knowing wink.

He was among friends, and he knew it.

"I guess we'll go on," said Old Joe.

The whole crowd seemed to start.

"You don't seem disposed to do anything with the man who stopped the stage, and probably helped to kill old Pete, the driver, so I'll just take him on ter Mesquite—"

Gilded Gid fell back with a muttered curse. That was what he did not want to take place.

The crowd came closer, and Joe Bundy saw the gathering of a storm.

"We'll try him," said a voice.

"You will? When?"

"Maybe to-day, and maybe not till to-morrow. We will want evidence, you see."

"Well, you shall have the prisoner when he's

wanted for trial. Mesquite is a good place to keep him, and then he will want ter see the cattle they talk about branding with the Dagger Brand."

At this there was a laugh at Gilded Gid's expense, but that worthy only grated his teeth and looked daggers at Old Joe.

"Come along. Stand back, gentlemen," said the lank scout.

The crowd moved just a little, but here and there several moved nearer to the Yankee's horse.

"This man goes with the last of the Bundys, dead or alive!" suddenly said Joe, and the next instant a revolver was placed so close to Gilded Gid's temple that he fell back with a shudder of horror.

"You wouldn't shoot him, Joe?"

"I wouldn't, eh? Try me an' see. He goes with me dead or alive an' he kin take his choice."

It was evident that the captured bandit felt that the Yankee would carry out his threat, for he could look into his eye, and turning to the baffled toughs about the horse, he said:

"They dare not hold me at the ranch. I am willing to go thither with this man. Mustang Merle is not going to play the fool like his servant plays it. Yes, I'll go with the Yankee."

This settled what looked like a bloody fight for the retention of a prisoner, and the result was that in a few moments Old Joe was riding off in triumph with his captive at his side.

The crowd watched them vanish with muffled oaths, for they wanted to rescue Gilded Gid from the long fingers of his captor, but they had to take things as they found them and did so with the worst of grace.

For some time not a word passed between Joe and his prisoner. Gilded Gid watched for an opportunity to escape, but gave it up at last, for the menace of eye and pistol was too much for him and he tried to make the best of a bad bargain.

The ranch was reached in time and when Old Joe delivered up his man, Mustang Merle had a sudden shock of surprise.

Gilded Gid had relapsed into sullenness, and when he was placed in a strong room he leaned against the wall and folding his arms glared madly at the young rancher.

"We must know what has become of Olive and her escort," said the boy, seizing Old Joe's arm. "Red Hawk may not discover anything and we know that the stage that carried them was held up and that they have fallen into the hands of Captain Silver Belt's band."

"That's what," cried Joe. "They are somewhere in the grip of this rascal and we shall soon hear of ransom, see if we don't."

It was so near night when Joe returned to the ranch with his captive, that it was resolved to do nothing before morning, and there was a chance that Gilded Gid, in order to purchase his freedom, would tell all he knew and thus throw some light upon the mystery.

It was near midnight and Old Joe standing among the trees in front of the house was looking at the light which told him where the bandit was, when a strange sound came from toward the cattle-sheds.

In another moment the whole herd there set up a terrible roaring and the next moment came swooping down upon him like a living avalanche.

"A stampede!" cried the scout springing to one side to escape death beneath the mad hoofs.

He was in the very nick of time for the outside steers grazed him, knocking him down and leaving him disabled for a moment on the ground.

Terrible was the confusion that now reigned on the ranch. It seemed as if every steer was on the run and the ground shook beneath the tread of the mad stampedes.

Away went the herds tearing through the ranch like wildfire with the herders shouting at the top of their voices as they made futile attempts to check them.

Joe Bundy got upon his feet as soon as possible and in a little while was running after the cattle as if he expected to overtake them and turn them back, an impossibility for a dozen men.

A certain terror had full possession of the steers. It seemed as if they had seen some apparition, such as had never before crossed their path, and while Old Joe looked with wonder in his heart they vanished from sight, though the noise they made told that they were tempts still on the run.

When he recovered from the fall he rushed toward the house and dashed across the porch.

As he reached the door it was dashed open in his face and a man who rushed out fell upon him

and he was thrown against one of the heavy pillars.

Almost at the same time he was dealt a remendous blow full in the face, stunning him and cutting his cheek, and in the momentary delirium that ensued he fell from the porch to the ground below.

How long he lay there he could not tell, though the time was brief, and when he picked himself up he darted for the porch again and entered the house.

Somehow or other he thought first of Gilded Gid, and opening the door which led to the desperado's room, he was surprised to find it empty.

"Not here!" cried Old Joe. "That was a part of the stampeder's plan. The cattle were to be stampeded and the prisoner set at liberty. But what's Captain Merle?"

He rushed from the house and began a search for the Boy Rancher. In doing so he nearly ran against one of the hands of the ranch, but Cactus Syl had not seen anything of the young master and they joined forces to look for him.

"Hello, what is this?" suddenly cried Bundy, looking at something that lay on the rich grass in front of them and a short distance beyond the house.

Both stooping, discovered it to be a steer which had been trampled to death by its companions, and when Old Joe struck a match and held it close to the animal an exclamation of horror burst from his throat.

There upon the animal's side was a new brand which to the two men had a startling significance while they breathlessly gazed upon it.

It was the celebrated Dagger Brand and beneath it the initials of Captain Silver Belt, its owner!

"This is his work," said Joe. "He stampeded the cattle, but not until he had branded some."

The old man's comrade made no reply, but seemed to draw back with a shudder of cowardice.

"Back to the house! I hear a noise there," exclaimed Joe and the two rushed back.

As they approached the building with the long porch they saw some one gallop away from it and then all was still.

"What does that mean?" asked Joe's friend.

"Heaven knows! It was not Mustang Merle; but here is something fastened to the pillar. It wasn't here when I fell headlong from the porch. What does it say?"

Once more a match was called into requisition and the little flame that shot upward showed old Bundy a bit of paper fluttering in the night breeze and his long fingers caught hold of it and he read as follows:

"TO THE RATS OF MESQUITE."

"This is but the beginning of a war to the knife. We have played our first hand; the second one will wind up the drama and will be ten times more terrible than the first. You may call this the War of the Branded Steer, though it will be a war of extermination. How do you like the opening skirmish?"

"CAPTAIN SILVER BELT."

"That is pretty cool," said Bundy, with a grin. "He has the courage to sign his name, though that was hardly necessary. The War of the Branded Steer, eh? How do you like it, Syl?"

But "Syl" was gone, and he stood alone by the porch with the paper in his hand.

"I'm going to cram that paper down Captain Silver Belt's throat!" suddenly exclaimed the man from Yankeedom, and crushing it in his hand he crowded it into his pocket and bounded away.

A terrible thought tortured him.

What had become of Mustang Merle, the Boy Rancher?

CHAPTER IV.

RESENTING AN OUTRAGE.

At a certain point, some distance from the scene of the last events, and in the heart of a valley sheltered from the sun by towering hills, stood a young man whose back was to a tree that reached far above the grass which hid his feet.

He was not quite alone, for near by sat several men enjoying a game of cards.

Everything went to denote that it was a camp of some kind, as indeed it was, for the men every now and then cast looks of anxiety toward the youth, as though afraid he might escape.

Just beyond the trees and in the same valley was a young girl who was as closely regarded by ten or a dozen men of the same stamp.

She was not past seventeen and her beauty of face and person was very striking.

This young person was Olive Oram, the young

girl expected by Mustang Merle to become the guest of Mesquite Ranch.

She and the youth we have just seen were the sole occupants of the stage which dashed into Tagus City, overturned, with the horses running like mad—a scene witnessed by Joe Bundy, the friend of the ranch.

They had fallen into the hands of Captain Silver Belt, the border bravo, and were being watched by some of his men while he himself had not returned from his night swoop upon the ranch itself.

After awhile the youth, whose hands were bound though he was permitted to roam through the camp, came toward the girl, whose eyes filled with a sad pleasure the moment they fell upon him.

"This is a sad ending to our journey," she said with a smile. "We have found the camp of one of these border bandits we have read so much about, and there is no telling what may befall us still."

"That is true, Olive, but these men, however rough they may be, dare not take our lives."

"I hope not, but as they seem to hate Merle so, they may carry their hatred to the killing point."

At this juncture there came toward the pair a tall, fine-looking man whose waist was encircled by a yellow sash with a green fringe.

He was the youngest bandit on the ground and when his eyes fell upon the girl whose orbs suddenly dropped, he touched his hat politely.

"You will pardon me, miss," he said, "but what relationship exists between this young rancher and yourself?"

"Mustang Merle and I are cousins," was the reply.

"And this young man?"

He designated the other prisoner with a look.

"I was Miss Oram's escort," was the prompt answer. "I had promised to see her safe at the ranch when I would have turned back."

"Is that all?" and the bandit laughed.

For a moment he stood before the pair looking mostly at the girl, when he suddenly exclaimed:

"What do you think the young rancher would give for you, miss?"

Olive Oram started.

"I cannot say, but I do not want to be ransomed by my cousin, for that would not be right."

"But you know that we want money as well as other people, and he has more than his share of riches, if all accounts be true. Would he give a thousand?"

Olive gave vent to a slight cry.

"You have no right to hold any one for ransom," said the youth, who was Fred Fuller, the son of an officer in the regular army.

"Wait till you've been addressed," growled the young bandit, turning upon the youth and sending him a look of dark hatred. "We are running this camp, and you may be sure that we wouldn't include you in the ransom."

Fred flushed to the temples, and momentarily forgetting his bonds, started toward the bandit, but halting suddenly, fell back and looked.

"Thought your hands were free, did you?" sneered the border hawk.

There was no answer.

"Let us come back to the subject of ransom," and the speaker turned once more to the young girl. "Do you think Mustang Merle would give us a cool thousand for your freedom?"

"I would not sanction the bargain if he entered into it."

"What, don't you want your liberty?"

"Not unfairly—not by robbery."

The man of the yellow sash twirled his mustache and laughed again.

"We'll try him, maybe," he said. "Yes, we are going to make something off of you, and will see how much Mustang Merle thinks of his pretty cousin."

The next moment he had turned away, but not before sending a dark glance toward Fred Fuller, who returned it with interest.

"What do you think now?" asked the young man, turning to Olive.

"It is a clear case of money brigandage," was the response. "These men are real outlaws, and are after the cash. You know how they shot old Pete, the driver of the stage, and left his body in the road, and all to get possession of me to hold me for ransom?"

"They are brutes of the first water!" and young Fuller looked toward a group of men who were playing on the grass and in the shadows of the trees.

"We are closely watched," said Olive.

"Of course."

"Where can Captain Silver Belt be?"

"He will turn up when he is needed to carry

out his plans, but just now we are guarded by his men, who will answer to him with their lives. If we had only been permitted to pass the bend in the trail, we might have effected our escape, but they were watching for us there, as if they knew we were on board."

"They did know it; they were warned beforehand by some one!"

"But by whom, Olive?"

The face of the young girl seemed to grow white.

"I cannot help thinking of one person whose name has been in my mind ever since we left the States."

"This is Texas and a State, you know."

"Yes, but it seems so much like the wild homes of brigands that I cannot call it a State. We are in the region of bandits—of men who live by plundering, and that is why I cannot think of the Lone Star Commonwealth as a State. But as I was saying, Fred, I cannot help thinking of one whose name is ever before me. I mean Jack Jordan."

Fred Fuller smiled a contemptuous smile.

"The last I saw of him was at the post-office ere we left the old home with such bright expectations ahead. He stood near me and when he came forward to say farewell he drew me toward him and whispered in my ear words that drove every vestige of color from my face."

"The villain!"

"I hear those words at this very moment. He had the look of a demon in his eye and his hand seemed like a grip of ice on my wrist."

"What did he say, Olive—that is, if you care to repeat his words."

"Oh, I don't see why I should conceal them from you, Fred. He said: 'I wish you a happy trip to your death among the bandits of the Southwest!'"

"Did he say that, Miss Olive?" exclaimed the youth, his face coloring. "I wish I had heard him! I would have left a remembrance behind. I never did like him and, then—But didn't he spend some months on the border, Olive?"

"He did, or at least that was the talk when he came back. He would not tell exactly where he had been, but everything went to show that he had been among rough men and had imbibed some of their habits. I thought he intended to do violence the night we started and when I freed myself from his grip I felt like offering up thanks."

For a short time Fred Fuller was silent and all at once looked at Olive, saying:

"I trust we are shut of Jack Jordan, but there is no telling what other rascals we are to encounter before we are out of the woods. I fear we have fallen into the hands of a man who will play us for his own good and we will be very lucky if we get out of his clutches for some days."

Ten minutes later the young folks separated and Fred went back to his tree.

The men were still gambling on the grass and did not seem to take much notice of him.

He leaned against the cottonwood and thought of the trip and the exciting scenes of the capture.

Suddenly a footfall struck his ears and he knew some one was behind him.

Without turning his head he listened a little while hearing the step moving closer and closer, but all at once it stopped altogether and he heard it no more.

Presently the man with the yellow sash was seen moving toward him, but he was not alone.

Fred looked not so much at the brigand as at the person who accompanied him.

"Heavens! can it be that I see him here?" he cried under his breath. "If that is Jack Jordan, his last words to Olive meant more than she thought."

He now fell to watching the bandit's comrade, a youth well built and clothed in the fantastic garments of the Southwestern rough. He did not appear to have seen him, yet he looked in his direction, and now and then Fred thought he saw a sinister smile playing at the corners of his lips.

All at once the youth so well watched turned on his heel and walked toward the spot occupied by Olive.

Fred Fuller followed him with his eye and waited.

Suddenly there arose on the air a cry that tingled the blood in the youth's veins and sent him over the ground with great bounds. His eyes fairly blazed.

"Here, you villain!" he cried, seeing Jack Jordan leaning forward and laughing in Olive's face. "You are the cause of our misfortunes,"

and giving his bonds a wrench they could not withstand, he found his hands free and the next moment he had the astonished Jack by the throat.

"Help! help!" shrieked the cowboy; but Fred's grip did not relax and they went to the ground together.

CHAPTER V.

THE DEVIL'S MOUTH.

It was with some difficulty that the two combatants were separated, and when this was done it was found that the cowboy had received considerable punishment.

The blood in Fred Fuller's veins was hot and when he thought of the wish made before they set out for the Boy Rancher's home, he was disposed to punish the maker to the best of his ability.

"Some other time," grated Jack Jordan, looking daggers at the young prisoner. "We will meet again when there will be no interference."

"Whenever you like," was the prompt answer. "You need not wait at all for another tussle."

But Jack did not seek another one just then and in a little while the camp of the Black Feathers was comparatively quiet.

The bandits now began to look for the return of their chief, who, it was understood, had gone off on a raid, and from what Fred and Olive could learn their destination was Mesquite Ranch.

We have seen how the cattle were stampeded by the brigands and how the note left behind was discovered at the porch, and leaving the camp for a spell we will go back to the young rancher's place and witness what is transpiring there.

Joe Bundy's anxiety was for Mustang Merle, whose disappearance troubled him not a little.

While he knew that the boy was brave enough to follow the stampeder with no one at his back, he could not think that he had done so, and when morning came without bringing Merle back, he became more and more anxious.

At last, saddling one of the best steeds attached to the ranch, he rode away and did not draw rein until he found himself far out on the plain that lay beyond the ranch.

The trail of the raiders was not hard to find and the path made by the mad cattle was equally plain.

Old Joe was pursuing the latter when all at once he halted and shaded his eyes with one of his bronzed hands.

A dark speck was moving toward him and while he watched it he thought he made out the figure of a mounted Indian.

Was it Red Hawk, the Apache?

At last the approaching figure made a sign which the Yankee answered and then both came together.

Red Hawk looked into Old Joe's face while the latter briefly told the story of the stampede, and when it was finished he seemed to smile, though in reality his red face did not relax.

"Master Merle taken prisoner by Captain Silver Belt," sententiously said the red-skin.

"Do you think so, chief?"

"Red Hawk think so. Boy taken in the trap, and the cattle marked with the dagger brand."

"Somebody will have to pay for this."

The Indian nodded and his eyes flashed.

"The last of the Bundys is on the war-path. He won't leave it till he has reached the end. You are with him, Red Hawk?"

The young Apache put forth his hand and the two clasped.

"I thought I could rely on you. Now, what shall we do?"

"Find Master Merle."

"Of course. Shall we go back and take the trail?"

Another nod and the two rode back toward the ranch.

They had gone some distance when the young red sprung from his horse and bent over the trail.

"What is it?" asked Old Joe.

In reply the Indian looked up, but at the same time pointed at the ground at his feet.

In a moment the old scout was beside him and the two were gazing at a dark stain on the scant grass which grow under the hot sun.

"Blood!" cried Bundy.

"Blood!" said the red-skin, in reply.

"Look! it runs this way," was the response, and the Yankee began to move over the ground, looking all the time at the stains which were visible.

They followed this new find some distance when they reached a spot where it suddenly

ended, and they stood for a moment lost in speculation.

"It is quite lost," said the scout. "We can not rediscover the trail of blood."

Red Hawk, looking toward the hills that rose before, said nothing.

Suddenly he ran forward and climbing one of the hills looked down at the surrounding country.

Beckoning Joe to his side, he pointed forward and for a little while the two looked, but said nothing audible.

"It moves! I see it now," suddenly exclaimed the old scout.

"Long white brother has good eyes. It moves."

"There are a number of men. What we are looking at is a line of mounted men—the stampeder of the ranch cattle."

The Indian's eye seemed to light up with sudden delight and for a moment longer he stood on the hill with his gaze fixed upon what he had discovered in the valley beneath.

By and by the hill was abandoned and the friends vanished as if the earth had swallowed them. They did not come into view again for some time when all at once they came out upon a little plain across which led a well-defined trail which they at once followed.

The continued absence of Mustang Merle told them that he had fallen into the clutches of Captain Silver Belt, the boss bandit of the Rio Tagus—a man who had sworn to avenge the deaths of Captain Red Jacket and Dolores Dick.

Old Joe wondered what had become of Gilded Gid whom he had succeeded in capturing in Tagus City shortly after the seizing of Fred and Olive and the killing of the driver of the stagecoach, though he was inclined to believe that he had been released by Captain Silver Belt and was even then with his master.

All at once the sounds of hoofs were heard, and almost before Joe and Red Hawk could pull their steeds from the trail two horses dashed by.

For a second the two friends looked at one another, and then the Indian dashed away in swift pursuit.

"The boy has made a break for liberty!" fell from Old Joe's lips as he rode over the ground close to the heels of the young Apache.

This was true, as they had seen, for the rider of one of the horses was Mustang Merle lashed to the saddle though urging the steed forward at the top of his speed and followed by a brigand who rode with a revolver in his hand.

It was a race for life, by the young rancher, and the hopes of the ardent pursuers were with him.

Red Hawk, riding in the advance, was likely to be the first to overtake the pair, and Joe contented himself with guarding the rear to prevent any other members of the gang from coming to the aid of their comrade.

On, on went pursuer and pursued.

Mustang Merle was helpless in the saddle, though he had tugged at his bonds with the strength of a young giant while his pursuer had nothing to hamper the freedom of his limbs.

Now the followers would lose sight of the Boy Rancher and his chaser, and again they would see them for a moment.

"He is making for the gulch—for the opening in the ground!" suddenly cried Old Joe. "He can't get 'round it and he can hardly expect his horse to leap it. Is Merle mad?"

The scout made a trumpet of his hands and shouted to the young Indian.

"The horse can't leap the chasm. For Heaven's sake, head them off this side of the Devil's Mouth."

But Red Hawk did not reply, if he heard at all, but kept on straining every nerve and urging his steed on at the utmost speed.

The chase now opened into a splendid plain extended for some distance when it suddenly lost itself again in a small woodland where there were many shadows to hide both pursuers and pursued.

Deep in the heart of that bit of wood lay what was called the Devil's Mouth, an opening in the ground which no horse had ever been known to leap, though tradition said that, years and years before, an old alcalde had jumped it on the back of a roan said to be the swiftest animal ever known on the Southwest border.

Mustang Merle seemed to be making straight for this place, as if he thought his steed could leap it, and the bandit, still in hot pursuit, was bearing down upon him as if eager to catch him before the rash attempt could be made.

Suddenly the figure of the Indian was seen to straighten in the saddle and Old Joe held his breath.

Within the last few minutes the Indian had

materially lessened the distance between him and the bandit, and was now holding a revolver in his hand.

Red Hawk seemed to see nothing but the man riding after Mustang Merle.

He had fastened his eyes on the man of the border, and appeared to be calculating the distance between them.

Old Joe was suddenly startled by the report of a pistol, and looking ahead, he saw a man throw up his hands and topple in a saddle.

At the same time he heard the young Indian send up a loud shout to warn the Boy Rancher of the danger toward which he was riding at breakneck speed, for the animal he bestrode seemed to have lost all control of itself and was dashing on to certain death in the gulch ahead.

Merle looked back with the whitest of faces, but it was evident that he could not check the speed of his horse.

He was doomed!

Grating his teeth, Red Hawk threw off the lasso that hung coiled at the horn of the saddle and pressed on.

He had one chance in a thousand.

"He won't do it," gasped Old Joe, shutting his eyes. "The noose is in the air, but it won't reach Merle. My God! it is all over with the Rancher of Mesquite!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE REJECTED HELP.

The momentous throw of the lasso was enough to send a chill through the old scout's veins.

He knew that the life of Mustang Merle hung on the cast and when he saw the horse and his rider on the very verge of the chasm with nothing but a rope between them and death, his very heart grew still and he mechanically reined in his own steed.

The eye of the young Indian had not failed him for the lasso sweeping through the air came down over the head of the young rider and was drawn taut around his arms.

Instantly Red Hawk's horse planted his fore feet on the ground and put forth all his strength.

The rope became tight and the Indian's horse, as immovable as a rock, told that something would have to give way.

Mustang Merle was, as we have said, lashed to the animal which he bestrode and when the lasso dropped over his head he was on the very fringe of the cliff.

It was a terrible moment fraught with the greatest interest, for unless something broke and that something the fastenings which held the Boy Rancher to his steed, he was lost.

Old Joe shut his eyes to hide the terrible sight before them.

He felt that when he should uncloset them again, the boy would have disappeared and Red Hawk might have the cast for his trouble.

But such was not the case.

At the supreme moment the something that gave way was the rope by which the Boy Rancher was held to the saddle.

It broke with a snap and the next instant the horse plunged down over the edge of the cliff and was lost to view!

The lasso of the young Indian had been thrown in the nick of time and the young master saved.

For a moment Old Joe could not credit the lucky salvation, but when he looked the second time and saw Merle standing on his feet, his joy knew no bounds, and his hat went sailing into the air and a hearty cheer burst from his lips.

Saved!

In a little while Red Hawk had run up and released the Boy Rancher and Merle had thanked his young preserver.

By and by he approached the edge of the gulch and looked over into it.

He beheld far down the mangled remains of the horse and then turned and again embraced Red Hawk.

"That's what I call by the skin of one's teeth," said Old Joe. "It is a closer call than the last of the Bundy's cares about enjoying, so he won't hanker after anything of the kind."

It was not long before the trio moved back over the ground and Merle related his adventures to his friends, telling them how he had been captured by the stampeder at the head of whom was the renowned Captain Silver Belt himself.

"It is a fight for life. I learned that during my brief captivity. The bandits of the border are in this fight for vengeance. They have sworn to avenge the deaths of Captain Red Jacket and Dolores Dick, and will let nothing stop them. They were not going to hold me for ransom, but intended to convey me to their camp, and, after a mock trial, put me to death."

Captain Silver Belt made no concealment of his intentions, and I had the pleasure of listening to my death warrant more than once."

"But they won't get to read it again!" said Joe Bundy.

"We must be on the alert if they don't," was the reply. "I don't intend to underestimate the power and the cunning of this Captain Silver Belt. Yes, this is a fight for life and the old ranch. We will go back, but at the same time we will not forget Olive and her escort, who must have fallen into the hands of the Black Feathers."

The return to the ranch was practically devoid of incident, and when it was reached it was found that a good many of the stampeded steers had returned, and that some wore the brand of Captain Silver Belt.

Mustang Merle ordered these to be killed at once, saying that the accursed brand of the crossed daggers should not be seen on his ranch, and his mandate was carried out and the cattle buried from wolf and vulture.

The shadows of night were descending upon the ranch when a horseman descended the hills on the west and rode forward.

His garments were covered with the dust of the trail, and when he came up to the porch of the ranch-house, it was discovered that he was a half-breed who had a sinister eye.

Mustang Merle, Red Hawk and Old Joe met him on the veranda.

"I am Jarillo," said the new-comer, drawing from his bosom a packet which he extended.

"Who sent this?" asked the Boy Rancher.

"It tells inside," was the answer, and Mustang Merle opened the letter and read its contents to himself.

"Where is your master?"

Jarillo winced and looked away.

"We mean business, and this is no time for parleying," said the young rancher, sharply. "We don't intend to make any bargains with any one, so long as we think we are able to hold our own."

"Don Ignace is over yonder," and Jarillo pointed over the hills.

"He is not alone?"

"No; the twenty horsemen are with him."

"What do you think?" and Mustang Merle turned to his friends. "I have here a letter from Don Ignace, the Mexican rider of the border—a man who pretends to hate Captain Silver Belt with all his heart. He offers to help us in our present trouble without pay, just for the purpose of getting even with the man he wants to meet."

The eye of the young Indian wandered toward the hills, and he looked at them for some time.

Red Hawk hated Mexicans with his whole nature and when he heard the name of Don Ignace he was seen to grate his teeth and shut his scarlet hands.

"I don't like Greasers," said Joe Bundy in low tones, with a look at Jarillo. "I never could get to liking 'em enough to make common cause with them, but this offer may come from the heart and we might need help before this thing is ended."

This was the Boy Rancher's opinion as was evidenced by his looks, but he waited for his friends to speak.

"Red Hawk will do whatever his master says," was the reply. "He is ready to fight Captain Silver Belt alone and single-handed and if the young rancher says take Don Ignace into our friendship, he will fight alongside of the Mexican, though he never liked a Greaser's hair."

"Them's my sentiments exactly," said Old Joe Bundy, turning to the young ranch king. "You will settle the question, Captain Merle."

Thereupon Merle turned to Jarillo and handed the letter back.

"Thank Don Ignace for me, but say that we prefer to meet the enemy ourselves and that we will defend the ranch and our lives to the last extremity."

In an instant the eyes of the bearer of the message fell in disappointment.

"I thought so," said Joe, under his breath. "That offer meant more than appeared on the surface. It was a trick of the Greaser bandit to carry out his own designs, and now, unless I am very much mistaken, we will have him to look after. Master Merle is right; this is a fight for life."

The following moment Jarillo touched the broad brim of his hat and turned away.

As he rode down the trail leading to the hills he cast a covetous glance over the rich acres of the ranch, not forgetting the house itself where, it was said, was to be found more money than

existed on all the other ranches on the Rio Tagus.

By and by the young master of Mesquite turned into the house and threw himself upon a cot for a few hours' sleep.

A long fight was before him. He doubted not that Captain Silver Belt would come back to the charge and strike a desperate blow for vengeance; that he (Merle) would be compelled to undergo great perils to save the ranch as well as preserve his own existence. At the same time he thought of his cousin, the beautiful Olive Oram, who had been captured by the Black Feathers and wondered if she were being subjected to any indignities.

All at once he sprung from his bed and went to the door.

Near this door was a window which looked out upon the porch and a glass in the sash was missing and had been for some time.

The moon shining upon the ranch-house filtered its beams through the vines that clambered over the porch and threw some fantastic shadows into the room.

Mustang Merle saw something besides the shadows thrown by the moon.

A hand was thrust into the room through the broken window and he found himself staring at it with strange and ungovernable curiosity.

He leaned forward and looked closely at the hand which was dark and well shaped and almost as small as a woman's.

It seemed to be feeling for the inside latch of the door, and without interfering with its search, Mustang Merle drew back and let it have its way.

The feel of the hand in the semi-darkness continued some time when all at once it found the latch and began to work it.

Presently the door was opened, for the fingers found the key on the inside, and Mustang Merle saw a figure in the room before him.

Already the Boy Rancher had drawn his revolver and, holding it in his hand was awaiting developments.

"I don't see him yet," said a voice. "This is the room he occupies; but I don't catch sight of the young ranch king."

"You don't, eh? Here I am!"

At the same time Merle thrust his weapon into the speaker's face and there was a quick recoil and a sharp cry.

"I have come to warn you. You are even now in the shadow of the Black Death—"

"Who are you?"

"I am Chipita—Chipita, the branded outcast queen."

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE SHADOW OF DOOM.

The name "Chipita" was one not entirely unknown to the Boy Rancher of Mesquite.

He had heard of her, but this was the first time they had ever stood face to face.

Chipita was tall and dark of skin, showing that she had Mexican blood in her, veins and her eyes seemed to snap while she talked.

"So we are in the shadow of death, are we?" said Mustang Merle. "I cannot say that you have brought us any news, but you may have something else to tell."

He released the hand he had taken and the beautiful woman fell back and looked around the room.

"I hate with all my heart the man called Captain Silver Belt. I have cause for hating him. Long ago he crossed my path and afterward I became Chipita, the Outcast Queen. He is preparing for a swoop upon the ranch and when he comes your cattle will bear the Dagger Brand which he has rendered famous. He has sworn to avenge the deaths of two of the most desperate men this fair land has ever seen—Captain Red Jacket and Dolores Dick, and he will leave no stone unturned to accomplish his object. I am here to warn you, though you may not care to listen to the words of Chipita."

"I turn a deaf ear to nothing now," said the young rancher. "I am thankful to you for the interest you have taken in my welfare; but I already know something of Captain Silver Belt's intentions and will be prepared for him."

"Then, indeed, you are a cunning one, for he is a fox in caution and will play a hand that cannot be foreseen."

"We will risk it, I say."

"I am glad of that. Don't let one of your friends sleep on the post of duty."

"When will the blow fall, Chipita?"

"I cannot say, but it will not be long delayed. He is hot and has laid his plans. Just what they are I, of course, cannot tell you, but you will have to watch with both eyes if you expect to

circumvent the greatest villain that ever saw the light of day."

Chipita, thinking her mission ended, drew back, but the hand of the young ranch king detained her.

"I want to go back," she said. "I have warned you, and my errand has been accomplished. Fight him to the end, for a surrender means death to you and yours."

"I will. I know that surrender means death. I have been in his power, but have escaped. You must not think that I am anxious to feel his hand again."

She walked to the door, and when she stepped out upon the porch a figure rose before her, and she recoiled with a sharp cry.

"Bless my stars, if it isn't the woman with the rattlesnake bracelets!" cried a voice, and Joe Bundy leaned forward and looked at the shapely wrists he saw displayed in the soft moonlight.

Chipita smiled and held out a hand, showing the bracelet of rattlesnake-skin that encircled her arm.

"You knew me by that, did you?" she asked.

"Yes. I saw you face the toughs of Tagus last summer, and it was the coolest bit of business I ever did see. What brings you to Mesquite?"

"Ask Captain Merle, your young master."

"She has come to warn us of Captain Silver Belt."

"Ah! And you are going back to-night?"

"I am."

As Chipita left the porch, she looked at Old Joe and that worthy stepped to her side.

The next moment the two were walking away, watched by the young rancher, who smiled to himself as he regarded them.

Down by the little creek that ran through the ranch the twain separated, and the last of the Bundys saw Chipita walk off alone.

"They may have followed her," he suddenly said. "I will see her safe across the ranch, and after that she can take care of herself."

Creeping through the shadows, Old Joe glided after the Outcast Queen and was at her heels.

Chipita had advanced some distance, when a figure rose in the trail before and a voice cried out:

"Halt!"

In a moment the form of the woman stood still in the moonlight.

She was confronted by the two men who held revolvers at a level and she could look into the menacing barrels without stooping.

They were on a level with her keen eyes!

"I thought they were watching," said Joe to himself. "They have been on her trail and don't seem inclined to give her much rest. Now, what will she do?"

Chipita stood for a second like a person surprised and frightened, and then stepping back threw her hand up and the old scout saw that it gripped a six-shooter.

"You have been playing your same old game," said one of the men. "You have been warning the boy of the ranch."

"What if I have? You have no right to swoop down upon him like a pack of eagles."

"We haven't, eh? We would like to know if we haven't a right to avenge the death of our friends. Come forward!"

But Chipita did not move.

"Forward, I say!" was the next word. "You don't think you can beat us at our game. We have the drop on you and you know us well enough to know that we don't stand any foolishness."

Old Joe, hugging the shadows, saw a defiant smile cross the dark face of the branded queen of the border.

"I own no man's authority," she said, coolly. "I obey no person but myself. You are right. I have warned the Boy Rancher of Mesquite and he knows that the blow is to fall."

"Curse her, let her have it, Jim! Dead women tell no tales."

Both desperadoes laughed and their fingers seemed to press the triggers of their weapons.

"I guess it's my time ter sail in," said Joe Bundy, and stepping forward he threw up his revolver and covered the pair.

"The lank Yankee of the ranch!" cried one.

"The last of the Bundys at yer service," was the retort.

"Git!" continued Joe. "We won't stand upon ceremony here and if I find one of you at the eend of my peace-maker at the eend of a second, the vultures will officiate at a first-class funeral in this very spot."

The bandits looked at one another and grated out something through their teeth.

"Move! I don't like slow coaches and you

have good legs under you. Tell Captain Silver Belt that we are ready for him whenever he feels like calling, an' if we can't take care of ourselves, why, we'll just hang up our hats and step out of the ring forever."

Something in the old Yankee's voice and mien told them that he was not to be fooled with and their revolvers suddenly dropped and they fell back.

Two minutes later they were not to be seen, and when they had fully disappeared Chipita turned to the old scout and said with a smile:

"Chipita will never forget this."

"Oh, that's all right. I would have done the same for any person. It's in the Bundy blood. Good-night. Keep an eye open for the bandits of the border."

They parted once more, and the scout went back to the ranch where, with that modesty that characterized him, he said nothing about his adventure, but fell to discussing the situation with Mustang Merle and Red Hawk, the Apache.

Meantime there was crawling upon the ranch, through the shadows of night, a foe worth watching.

The line made by the enemy was long and sinuous, like the crawl of a snake, and as it wound itself among the hills, and drew near to the ranch, it seemed to carry death and destruction in its wake,

Chipita had not warned Mustang Merle a moment too soon, but the Boy Rancher, in anticipation of a night attack, had thrown out pickets, who were watching everything with the eyes of eagles.

Suddenly there burst in upon the night council in the ranch a young man, whose face told that he had something important to communicate.

"I have seen men crawling up the ravine, near the mouth of the mine!" he said.

In an instant Old Joe started forward.

"Then they have come!" he cried.

Ten minutes later everybody on the ranch was ready for the last desperate struggle, but the attack did not come.

Hours wore away and daylight at last put in an appearance.

Far and wide swept the anxious eyes of Mesquite Ranch.

Not an enemy was to be seen.

At last Red Hawk and Mustang Merle went toward the old mine and entered it.

The interior was as familiar to them as the inner rooms of the ranch-house itself.

"Hark!"

The hand of the Boy Rancher had seized Red Hawk's wrists, and he was listening with all ears in the darkness of the chamber.

"Red Hawk heard it, master," was the whispering reply. "It is to the left, where the mills are."

"In the mill-room? I thought so."

The friends crept to the left, and in a little while stopped in the room, where they listened again.

For a moment they heard nothing, then a voice that seemed to chill them with terror, said:

"Everything is ready, Pedro. The mine stands finished. All you have to do is to press the button. I will give the signal in a few seconds."

Once more the hand of Mustang Merle caught the Indian's arm.

"God in heaven! they have discovered the old mine we made months ago for the last extremity," he whispered. "If the button is pressed we will be blown to atoms."

Red Hawk jerked away from the Boy Rancher and vanished.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BOY RANCHER'S NERVE.

For a brief moment the Boy Rancher of Mesquite stood in the dense darkness of the mine chamber, and seemed to count the beatings of his heart.

He knew that when the button was pressed the mine would be blown to atoms, and that he would share the same dread fate, therefore the situation was quite enough to appall him.

He did not know where Red Hawk had gone, though he felt that the gallant young war-eagle of the Apaches would not desert him without a struggle, and he was compelled to wait in the darkness of what seemed certain death in hopes that the Indian would turn up again.

"Press the button whenever you wish," said the voice he had heard before, and this time the speaker seemed so near that he could touch him,

The voice had a familiar sound, and Mustang Merle was about to level his revolver in the direction of it and press the trigger instead of

the "button," when he was touched by a hand.

The following moment he was drawn away, and in a little while was out of the room.

"They have full possession of the mine," said a voice at his ear. "Captain Silver Belt is here in force, and his men have taken the old bonanza."

Mustang Merle did not reply.

"Come, Master Merle; there is one way out," and he was dragged from the spot and felt that he was moving through the ranks of the desperado with whom he was making the fight for life.

Nothing important occurred during the next few seconds, when all at once a light flashed in their faces, and they saw a sight that stopped them at once.

A dozen men, armed to the teeth, stood in a vaulted chamber of the old bonanza. They could see their rough shirts and yellow sashes, and even the black feathers in their hats, which latter decoration had given the name of the Black Feathers to Captain Silver Belt's band.

But Merle and his faithful adherent saw more than this.

Near the men stood a young girl, whose face was white and seamed with anxiety.

"Heavens! it is Olive," gasped Merle. "They have brought her with them, not daring to trust her anywhere under guard. Look, Red Hawk; that is my beautiful cousin, Olive!"

The young red-skin said nothing, but fixed his eyes on the captive of the border band and watched her, as if ready to dash forward and rescue her from the hands of the Black Feathers.

Mustang Merle did not want to quit the spot without trying to render Olive some assistance, but the whispered counsels of Red Hawk prevailed and they continued their journey.

Once beyond the mine, they began to creep toward the ranch, which they reached to find Old Joe in a state of anxiety concerning their protracted absence, and a brief consultation was held in the Boy Rancher's secret room.

Captain Silver Belt had come back and was on the ground ready to fight the last desperate battle of revenge!

"This is the last of the bandits of the Tagus," said Merle. "We had to meet and defeat Captain Red Jacket and Dolores Dick, and this man is their sworn avenger. There can be no peace while he sits a saddle; no safety while he lives. You may never know the terrible oath he and his men have recorded against us; they have come to carry it out to the letter and are here ready to make Mesquite the abode of the owl and the bat."

The listeners looked at one another and seemed to get new courage.

They gathered closer around the young rancher and told him they were ready to swear an oath as terrible as the one taken by Captain Silver Belt and his men; but the boy ranch king did not exact anything of the kind.

Then Mustang Merle's thoughts recurred to Olive who had been brought to the ranch by her captors.

The fair girl was in the grip of the tigers of the border, and would not be released without a desperate struggle.

What had become of the youth who had promised to escort her to Mesquite? Had they finished him, and was he lying somewhere with the dark wings of the vulture brushing his face?

After the conclusion of the council of war in the house, a figure stole toward the old mine.

It was that of the young ranch king himself, fearless at all time, but never cooler than now with a desire to assist Olive tugging at his heart-strings.

Mustang Merle had formed a design. He knew where he had seen her last, and thought that, knowing the old mine as he did, he might be able to help her.

Down over the rough ground he crept, making no trail in the short grass, but taking his life in his hands. To be discovered meant death; to be captured by the men of the border meant a doom terrible enough to make one shudder.

He reached the mouth of the mine and dodged into its darkness.

For a little while he heard nothing, and when he crept forward, moving over the ground inch by inch, he listened for the slightest sound.

Merle knew all the tortuous windings of the bonanza. He wormed his way along shelves of stones and now and then stopped to listen.

As yet not a sound to tell him that the mine was inhabited by an enemy.

Suddenly he drew back and hugged the dark wall.

"I wonder how far it is down?" was what he heard.

"Just drop and find out."

"I wouldn't do that for the world. It might be too far a drop, you know."

That voice!

The Boy Rancher had heard it before and his heart stood still as he listened.

It was evident that more than one person was moving near him and he expected to see a light struck and thus stand revealed by its glare.

But, the parties seemed to pass on, the voices ceased and he was alone once more.

At last he came to the edge of what seemed a dark pit, for he could feel nothing beyond the wall.

"I don't see why the captain don't attack," he heard spoken.

The young rancher fell back.

"I don't want to be cooped up in this place all the time. Here we have been ever since we struck the ranch and we haven't touched an ounce of gold. Curse it all, I say, why don't the captain give the signal?"

These words came up from a point some distance below him and Mustang Merle smiled.

He knew where the speaker was and could have dropped a stone into the little room he occupied.

Once more he was on the point of moving forward when the voice of a woman was heard.

"What will Captain Silver Belt do with my cousin, Merle?" it asked.

"You may be sure he won't give him his liberty," was the quick answer.

"Will he kill him?"

"He'll try him first."

These words were followed by a laugh and the girl—Olive, of course—did not speak.

"You see, miss, we are bound to have a settlement with the boy who has lorded it over this region," the bandit went on in the dark. "He has finished some of the captain's best friends—"

"Bandits like himself, weren't they?"

"Perhaps they were, but that don't prevent him from thinking a good deal of them. I say we are going to have a final settlement with Mustang Merle, and this is a fight to the finish. We'll put him on trial, but it wouldn't be hard to guess the result."

"You are right; it would not," said Olive. "He is condemned now and his capture will settle his doom."

"It ought to settle it," growled the unseen bandit, and Mustang Merle felt his fingers tighten at the butt of his revolver as he attempted to penetrate the gloom and make out the figure of the man who guarded the girl.

In a little time he ran back along the shelf and returned with a coil of rope.

Fastening the coil to a projecting rock, he began to lower himself toward Olive and the guard with his knife between his teeth.

It was a hazardous undertaking and as he went down over the rope without the slightest noise, he must have realized that he had staked his life on the desperate play.

Hand over hand like the fearless sailor, descended the boy of a hero's nerve, and when he reached ground he leaned against the wall and caught his breath.

For some time all was still and then he heard a slight noise which seemed to locate the actors in the drama underground.

Olive could not be far from him now and while he listened, trying to discover her exact whereabouts, he felt all his nerve return.

"What is that?" suddenly said the girl.

"The captain coming back, perhaps," was the reply.

Captain Silver Belt!

The name passed through Merle's mind with a thrill.

He moved toward the spot where he now knew Olive was.

With one hand before him as a searcher he kept on till it touched something that yielded and then recoiled.

Was it his cousin?

"Not a word! I am Merle!" he said, and the next moment was moving on again, holding in a grip of iron the arm he had found.

But he was not yet out of the death-trap.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BANDIT'S MATCH.

MUSTANG MERLE knew that he was enveloped by enemies of the coolest kind.

He had found Olive, the long looked-for cousin, but she was still in peril and he himself was not out of danger by any means.

For some time he led the girl by the hand bidding her in whispers not to speak and at all times listening for the voice of the captain of the Black Feathers.

He had stolen Olive so adroitly from the guard who as yet seemed not to have discovered the trick, that he could hardly keep back a laugh despite the danger of the situation, and when he found himself out of the cavern where the rescue had taken place, he turned to the girl and said:

"This is better luck than I looked for; but we must not think of self-congratulation yet, for we are yet 'in the woods.'"

"But we are out of the hands of the guard and that is something," was the reply. "I cannot say what has become of Fred, but let us hope that he will escape."

A few steps further on and the cousins stopped again.

The following moment a loud cry rung through the mine.

"Heavens, what has happened now?" gasped Olive.

"That was a signal!"

In another second the sound of some one running over the hard floor of a dark corridor smote the ears of both, and Mustang Merle drew Olive against the wall.

"She has escaped," they heard a harsh voice say. "I can't tell just how it happened, but, of course, she is somewhere in the mine, for not being used to it, she does not know the way out. Let every point be watched. Don't lose a single sound and follow every one you hear."

"We are lost!" said Olive. "They will guard the entrance and when we attempt to make our way out we will be discovered."

"It may not be so bad as that," was the retort. "I know this old place as well as the chambers of the ranch castle. We are at home here, more so than the rascals who have taken possession of it."

"Thank Heaven!" fervently ejaculated Olive. For some time they heard a babel of sounds and then moving lights crossed the line of their vision.

The Black Feathers were looking for their fair prisoner, who had given them the slip, though they were not aware that Mustang Merle was at all responsible for her liberation.

At last they seemed to have reached the end of their tether, for they were confronted by a light and behind it marched several men who were recognized as Captain Silver Belt's companions.

"There is no escape now," said Olive. "This to be the end of our flight."

But Merle did not think so. He stepped back against the wall and reached up.

"This is the Chamber of the Padre's Ladder," said he. "There are niches in the wall and they lead up nearly one hundred feet. Can you climb, them, Olive?"

The hands of the young girl felt the first niche and her answer was full of assurance.

"Are all the niches like the first one?"

"They are."

"Then, I can go up the ladder."

"Forward, then!"

In a jiffy the courageous girl had placed her foot in the first niche and was moving upward.

It was a perilous climb in the dark and when they had reached a point of forty feet above the floor the men with the torch passed directly under them.

Both Olive and Merle looked down upon the stalwart men of the border and saw them pass on in the futile search.

"Shall we go on now?" asked the girl.

"Yes; all depends on our reaching the floors overhead. Can you hold out?"

"With life at stake, I could climb to the stars!"

In this manner, hand over hand, the cousins ascended to the caverns above, and when they left the wall they were safe some distance above the lower chambers of the old mine.

Mustang Merle led Olive from the mine by another entrance than the main one and they were moving toward the ranch.

Gaining an admittance by the back door, they entered the secret room, where Olive sank into a chair with a smile of relief.

"Who is this?" cried a man, coming in and halting in front of the young girl.

"My cousin, Miss Olive Oram," said Merle.

"One of the passengers of the stage, eh?" and Joe Bundy bent over the girl's pale face and laughed. "What's become of the other one?"

"Of Fred, do you mean?" said Olive. "I cannot answer you, and am very sorry I cannot. I saw him last in the camp of the bandits just after his battle with Jack Jordan, who seems to belong to Captain Silver Belt's gang. I have grave fears concerning Fred's fate, for the young man whom he whipped for insulting me ere we

left the States is his mortal enemy, and will not leave a stone unturned to get even with him by any means in his power."

Joe fell back, and for a moment longer regarded Olive, when he said:

"Hang it all, I wish she hadn't come just now. We're in a peck of trouble."

"Of course, but Olive is to be defended to the last extremity."

"Sartainly, Captain Merle, for it's ag'in' the Bundy religion to go back on a needy female while danger menaces. I'm in for the hull war, an' will give the young lady all the assistance in my power. Yours truly, J. Bundy."

Olive smiled and thanked the old scout for his loyalty, when the Boy Rancher turned to admit another person to the room.

This person was Red Hawk whose eye took in the situation at a glance, and in a moment he had stepped to Olive's side.

"Red Hawk stand by white girl to the last!" he said, taking her hand. "Him fight for her till his blood all out."

"That's the young red all over," said Old Joe. "I've seen his mettle tried and that's not a bigger Injun for his size out o' doors."

Suddenly there came to the ears of all a sound which drew the three friends across the room.

Fists hammered on the door.

"Are you there, Captain Merle?" cried a loud voice.

"Here!" answered the young ranch king. "What has happened, Merrit?"

"They have stampeded the cattle again and the herds are running off like mad."

"More Dagger Brands," quietly said the Boy Rancher through his teeth. "What else, Merrit?"

"There is a fire burning over near the stacks."

"The match!" and Mustang Merle turned toward Red Hawk and Joe. "You know what that means."

"Which way is the wind?" he asked the man at the door.

"Blowing toward the house, sir."

It seemed that at that moment the face of the young rancher of the border lost every vestige of color for he fell back from the door and gripped tighter than ever the revolver he had drawn.

Probably at that time he thought of his battles with other bandits. He may have recalled the fight for the ranch with Captain Red Jacket, and the defense he had made against Dolores Dick and his pards; at any rate, his face was tensely drawn and determination was stamped there.

"Open the door!" he said to Bundy.

The long hands of the old scout took down the stout barricades and he waited for the next order.

Mustang Merle went over to Olive who was wondering what was going to happen and led her to the opposite side of the chamber.

"This way, Cousin Olive," he said, touching a button in the wall and a secret door swung open.

"You see steps before you. Go down and keep on till you come to a door. You will find underground a safe asylum—one, the existence of which is not known to the Black Feathers of the line. We will join you soon. Go!"

He pressed the fair girl's hand and saw her step fearlessly into the dark opening which closed at once.

"Now for the bandits of the Southwest," he said, turning to his companions. "The grass is very scant just now between us and the stacks, and, then, the wind may shift."

Opening the door whose barricades Joe Bundy had removed, Merle led the way to the porch. Indian and Yankee were at his heels.

"Look, the stacks!" cried he, pointing away to where the sky was being lighted up by a fire. "That is the work of the outlaw's match."

They stood side by side on the porch sheltered and hidden by the vines that shaded it.

Higher and higher leaped the flames. The light grew intenser and fell upon the house itself.

All at once a figure leaped upon the porch and was arrested by the supple hand of the old scout.

"Will it reach us?" asked the Boy Rancher, seeing that the man was one of his own men.

"I don't know. The grass is burning like powder."

"Between us and the stacks?"

"Yes."

At that moment a mounted figure appeared in sight and drew rein in sight of all, and afforded a splendid target in the ruddy light of the burning stacks.

"That is Gilded Gid, the fellow who got away

from me!" cried Joe Bundy, and his Winchester was at his shoulder. "I'll just give him a dose of 'Doctor Bundy's Sure Shot,' and—"

"No, not now," said Merle, interruptingly, and his hand fell across the rifle-barrel, and his eye met the old scout's look.

"Postponed for a spell," said Joe, dropping the gun.

All fell to watching the figures of man and horse as they were presented in the light, and suddenly the form of Red Hawk sprung from the porch and disappeared.

"By the eturnal, what is Reddy up to now?" cried the man from Yankeedom.

CHAPTER X.

A BREATHING-SPELL.

THE young Apache warrior, ever on the alert, had caught sight of something which had caused the sudden vanishment.

He ran to within a short distance of the line, and there stopped, crouching on the ground like a panther, with his eyes afire and his bosom heaving with excitement.

Nothing had ever daunted the boy of the Apaches.

He remained in this position some time, when he arose and crept off to the left, disappearing, but not for long.

In a little while he came back, creeping over the ground, and still watching the fire.

By this time the flames had reached a spot near the house, and the grass was shriveling up before the fierce heat.

Up to this time not a bandit had been visible, but it was known that they had come, and all thought they were playing some deep game by which they expected to get possession of the ranch without much loss to themselves.

Suddenly a figure was seen running toward the house, and those on the porch noticed that it staggered like a wounded person.

"Chipita!" cried Mustang Merle.

In a moment, the figure, watched intently by every one, was seen to spring upon the veranda, and in sight of the group it threw out its hands and cried:

"Chipita, the outcast queen, had hoped to live long enough to pay Captain Silver Belt back for his rascality, but she has been shot. They are out yonder—the ruffians of the border—and all have taken an oath not to give up until they have reduced the houses of Mesquite to ashes. Look! Where yon fire is sits Captain Silver Belt on his horse watching the flames as they creep toward the house. Why do you stand here idle, Captain Merle?"

The next moment she had staggered forward and leaned heavily against the wall.

There was a deathly pallor on the woman's face and her breath came fast.

The Boy Rancher sprung to her assistance and caught her before she could fall.

Chipita was carried into the room and left in charge of Old Joe, who professed to know about wounds, while Merle and his friends on the porch prepared to meet the strategy of the bandits.

But all at once the fire seemed to fade. The stacks were destroyed and the heavens no longer were lighted up by the conflagration. The grass had burned out and the waters of the little creek had prevented the flames from leaping onward to the house.

It looked as though the bandits of the border had been providentially baffled.

After awhile the form of Red Hawk came gliding back and he presented himself to his young master.

"The captain of the Black Feathers has departed," said the young Indian.

Mustang Merle started.

"It can't be, chief!" he cried.

"Go out and see," and the Indian pointed toward the waning fire. "He and his men have ridden back and there is no enemy out yonder."

"Did you see them ride off?"

"Red Hawk saw them turn their backs to the ranch."

"This means something deep; it is a trick which must be watched. I know something about the cunning of Captain Silver Belt and—"

"It is a trick!" and Chipita appeared suddenly before the two friends. "Captain Silver Belt is full of tricks and will not let the young owner of Mesquite escape him for long. That is his oath and he will see that it is carried out to the letter, if he can."

"But Red Hawk maintains that he has taken his departure," said Merle.

"He may have gone but that is one of his tricks. He will come back and when he comes it will be in another guise."

The Indian looked at the woman and nodded. "Red Hawk knows the captain," he replied. "He has been on his trail and he cannot hide it from the keen eyes of the young warrior of the Apaches."

"You are worth your weight in gold, Red Hawk."

The fire went out all along the line and the men who went out to look after the bandits reported that none were in sight.

To all appearances they had gone for good and the rest of the night passed without excitement.

Olive was brought up from the underground apartment she had occupied and found herself in the house she was to visit.

Daylight enabled the ranchmen to assess the damage. They found that the herds had been stampeded and that many of the cattle were branded with the brand of crossed daggers, showing that Captain Silver Belt had got in his work as he had sworn he would.

The day was half spent when a man rode over the hills to the ranch-house and dismounted at the porch.

He was regarded with a good deal of curiosity, for he looked the typical southerner and carried himself with an air that excited both disgust and suspicion.

He asked in a lofty tone for Mustang Merle, and when the Boy Rancher presented himself he leaned toward him and said:

"I am Don Ignace. You rejected my offers of assistance some time ago, but I am here, as you see, to renew them for the last time."

Now, this Don Ignace had but little better reputation than Captain Silver Belt and he was known as a dare-devil, besides being a sort of free lance whenever he could line his pockets with gold by doing so.

He was handsome and carried himself like a prince in the saddle; but for all this he was as cruel a rascal as ever drew rein in front of a marked estate.

"We seem to be faring well enough," said Mustang Merle to the man. "I don't see that we need any help as yet."

"You don't, eh? What does that mean?" and Don Ignace pointed toward the burned stacks and blackened earth.

"Captain Silver Belt was here last night—"

"And took a notion to give you a foretaste of what will come next time? Just so, and yet you say you need no help? By Saint Louis! it seems to me that you are really helpless."

The young rancher smiled. "And so you have come to offer help?" he said.

"I have good men at my back."

"How many?"

"Five-and-twenty."

"Where are they?"

"Within call."

"When we need them, if need them we ever do, we will give you a call."

The brow of Don Ignace grew dark.

"I did not come to trifle," he said quickly.

"When I ride back if, you refuse my help, I will never come again with the same offer."

Mustang Merle was silent for a moment.

"You don't help people for nothing, Don Ignace," he replied. "I know that you and your men are the free lances of the border and that they fight for something. Now, what would you expect from me in return for your help?"

The eyes of the border rover suddenly glittered and he bent forward, at the same time dropping his voice to a whisper.

"I won't ask very much," said he. "I am tired of living as I have been, and am rich enough to retire and live like a gentleman the remainder of my days. You have with you, Captain Merle, a pretty girl who would make an excellent wife for a gentleman of my caste, and—"

The sudden lifting of the Boy Rancher's hand checked the Mexican.

"We need talk no further. You refer to my Cousin Olive, and enough has been said. You can ride back to your men, Captain Ignace, and play the border robber as of old."

The face of the rascal was a study.

He stepped to the steed, and, mounting, looked down into the face of the young owner of the ranch.

His eyes had a deadly gleam, and his womanish hands were clinched.

"You refuse, do you?" he hissed.

"I seriously refuse to have anything to do with you."

"Beware! You may have an enemy as deadly as Captain Silver Belt. You don't know the man who leads the free lances of the border."

"I know enough of him."

Don Ignace waved his hand toward the house and gathered up the lines.

He would have turned away if the next moment the door had not opened and the lank figure of the old scout stepped into full view.

"One moment Mr Ignace," said the Yankee who carried in one of his big hands a cocked revolver which he handled in a manner that did not strike the robber's fancy.

"Don Ignace has no talk with the border mummy," was the contemptuous rejoinder.

"You haven't, eh? Well, I'm the liveliest mummy you ever tackled, so don't be too fresh. You have just said that we are likely to have an enemy as bad as Captain Silver Belt. All right! Ride back to your men and put the game in motion. This is a fight for life, as we well realize, but we are ready for the battle. And hereafter if ever you get in front of Old Joe Bundy's shooting irons, a trigger is apter to be pressed to the ruin of the house of Ignace. That! I've had my say, and you kin meditate on it as you ride back."

The old scout stood like a statue in front of the yellow bandit who glowered at him with all the hatred he could put into a glance, and suddenly striking his steed with the silver spurs he wore he wheeled and dashed away.

"Don't forget!" shouted Joe. "Dr. Bundy is always at home and the Sure Shot never fails."

Something like a curse came back and the following minute the bandit rode over the hills leaving Merle and Joe laughing at his sudden departure.

"A new foe," said Merle.

"And one I intend to wing at the first opportunity."

CHAPTER XI.

FRED FULLER'S PERIL.

CAPTAIN SILVER BELT was not in an enviable frame of mind when he rode back over the hills near the ranch and left it undestroyed.

He rode ahead of his men and did not speak for some time.

"We'll have sharp work with the boy now," said the men to one another. "The young man who escorted Olive, the girl, and whom we left at camp, will be placed on trial and the captain will see that he gets a noose and dances on air."

This was conceded on every hand, for Fred Fuller had been left behind while Olive had been taken on the raid for the purpose of letting her see how thorough the vengeance of the bandit captain could be.

It was not a very long ride back to the camp and when the bandits reached it they discovered their captive safe under guard and awaiting his doom.

He was not told that Olive had escaped from the clutches of the Black Feathers, else his face would have worn a smile of satisfaction; but when he looked and failed to see the girl among the men he thought something favorable to her interests had taken place.

Captain Silver Belt was in no merry mood when he showed up at the old rendezvous near the bank of a river and in a pretty grove of cottonwoods.

He glared at Fred as if to tell him to prepare for the worst, and when he came down upon him after dark, he stopped and asked him in an insulting voice how he liked his "new home."

Half an hour later, a bandit approached the young captive and led him forward.

Jack Jordan had not shown up since the tussle on the ground, but Fred had been told by a member of the band that the youth belonged to it, and was often in the saddle on some raid or border foray.

"He is a very whirlwind, that young chap," said the bandit. "He is the bravest of all, and nothing keeps him back from a dangerous swoop. Besides, he acts as spy for us, and many are the rich ranches he's singled out."

"His time will come," answered Fred. "This young war-eagle of the plains will make his last swoop one of these days, and he will regret that he ever took service under the banners of Captain Silver Belt."

"You can't kill him. He has more lives than a cat, and is to succeed our captain one of these days."

Captain Silver Belt waited under a tree for the young escort, who had been brought forward by one of the band.

The bandit was eager to open the game against his enemy.

Fred Fuller expected to receive a sudden order to step into the border noose, but found nothing of the kind awaiting him.

On the contrary, Captain Silver Belt leaned toward him and smiled.

"What is your father worth?" he asked.

Fred did not reply for a second.

"He is well-to-do," he said at last.

"The nabob of the city he lives in, eh?"

"Not that."

"Come! We know all about him, and that he is worth a million or two."

The youth laughed.

"My father is a captain in the United States Army and captains there are not millionaires."

"But the fortune he has inherited? He prefers the army to living the life of a private citizen."

"That latter may be true."

"You will find pen and ink on yon table," and the captain of the Black Feathers pointed toward a rough table under a tree. "You will write to him, saying that you are held for ransom, that for twenty thousand dollars in hand, we will release you and send you back unharmed."

The form of the youth straightened till it seemed an inch taller than ever.

"Not a dollar shall you take from my father by any such proposition!" he exclaimed.

The bandits looked at their captain with astonishment.

"A little stubborn, eh?" smiled Captain Silver Belt. "We have a way of bringing such refractory people as you to terms."

No answer.

"We shall try you at once," the brigand suddenly cried. "We will see what you say to that."

"You have me in your power, and the game is in your hands," said Fred.

"Right you are. The trial will open at once."

The rough table was carried out from under the tree where it had been placed, and the bandits gathered round it.

Near Captain Silver Belt stood a young bandit, who was watching these proceedings with a malicious grin on his face.

Fred caught sight of him and saw him drop his eye.

Jack Jordan had just come up, and was an interested spectator, for he had wormed himself to the front, and was taking in the whole proceedings.

"Who is the prosecuting witness?" said some one, and the next instant Jack Jordan came into full view.

"I am," he said. "I accuse that person of invading the region occupied by Captain Silver Belt, without the proper authority."

This flimsy charge almost drew a laugh from the lips of the young friend of Olive Oram.

Accused of "invading" a portion of the United States! It was enough to provoke a smile.

"What says the prisoner?" and Captain Silver Belt turned upon the prisoner and looked him in the eye.

"I came into this part of the country like any other citizen of the United States. I have a right to 'invade' it, as you say, for it is free land for any one, and the Stars and Stripes wave over it as well as over the rest of the country we love."

"But we run things down here. We are the lords of the border—the Black Feathers of the Southwest, and we own no authority, not even that of Uncle Sam."

Silence fell after Captain Silver Belt's answer, and no one seemed inclined to break it.

"The prisoner pleads guilty," said Jack Jordan, at last.

"I do in the light in which you regard my coming."

Captain Silver Belt turned upon his men and held up his hand:

"What is the verdict, men of the border?" he cried.

A dozen bronzed hands went up at once.

"Guilty!" was the cry.

The lips of the youth met, but his eye did not quail.

"And what shall the sentence be?"

"The noose!"

Captain Silver Belt looked at the young captive and smiled. He had expected just such a verdict.

"We never give one much time. The sentence of the court is soon carried out, and in this instance we will not be partial."

Fred Fuller looked at the revolvers that protruded from the belts of the bandits, and seemed to wish that he could reach the nearest one.

Jack Jordan, his eyes lit up with the light of vengeance, stood erect, and appeared to watch with delight the proceedings of the border court.

The light that lit up the scene came from a number of torches made fast to the trees in the grove and all threw a weird glare over the spot.

Fred stood apart from the men of the band and looked at their leader with undaunted mien.

He expected no mercy.

The brief trial and the flimsy accusation had told him that none would be granted and he was bidden by these things to prepare for the noose.

"The beginning of this trouble stands yonder!" suddenly exclaimed Fred, and his hand covered Jack Jordan who quailed the moment the words were spoken.

"He hates me because I happen to be the escort of the young lady who was coming to visit Mustang Merle, her cousin," he went on. "He insulted Olive ere we left the North and wished that she might fall into the clutches of bandits. That young coward and outlawed vulture of society dares not step forth and meet me hand to hand before Captain Silver Belt carries out the infamous sentence of his court."

All eyes were turned upon Jack Jordan who stood near by and met the accusation with pallid face.

He seemed to shrink from the outstretched finger of the young man, and when Fred suddenly stepped toward him he actually recoiled.

"Draw a line on the ground and I will mark it. I will meet him now and with any weapons he may choose. I brand him coward in the midst of his friends and cowards never fight!"

Captain Silver Belt looked at Jack who bit his lips and glared at Fred while blood mounted to his temples and colored them.

"Fight him if you have a drop of cool blood in your veins. Don't let him cow you like that," and similar expressions were heard on every side, while every brigand looked at Jack Jordan.

All at once the young rascal moved.

His figure seemed to leap up in the torchlight and he shouted hoarsely.

"Draw the line on the ground and I will fight!" he cried. "I will show him that there isn't a drop of coward blood in Jack Jordan's body. He has challenged me and I accept. I choose revolvers, distance ten paces and the spot where we stand!"

"That suits me! I have longed to face you ever since I heard of your infamous wish breathed in Olive's ear. Draw the line!"

The bandits fell back and went to work at once. A line was drawn in the ground near the tree and the torches arranged so as to throw all their light upon the spot.

Fred was given choice of revolvers from among the many at hand and selecting one from the belt of a bandit, he took his place and announced himself ready for the duel.

Jack did the same and in a little while they stood back to back waiting for the deadly signal.

CHAPTER XII.

A CHANGE OF MASTERS.

THOSE who watched the youth from the North, expected to see him shrink from the ordeal to which he was being subjected, but they were disappointed.

He held the six-shooter with a firm grip, and waited calmly for the signal.

On the contrary, Jack Jordan seemed to recoil from the duel, as if he did not look for Fred to face him to the end, and when the bandit who was to deliver the signal stepped forward for that purpose, a shiver of dread passed over his frame.

"I don't want to cheat the court," he suddenly cried. "I won't do it, but will let the sentence of the tribunal be carried out."

A murmur of dissatisfaction was heard.

"That is little short of cowardice," said a voice, and the speaker, who was Captain Silver Belt himself, looked at Jack and smiled.

"I won't fight him. He belongs to you!"

"I waive my rights if you will stand up and carry out the duel."

But Jack shook his head and dropped his hand.

"You won't, eh?" cried Captain Silver Belt.

"I will not."

A smile of derision took possession of Fred's face.

"Jack Jordan, you are a coward," he said. "You are an insulter of young ladies, and refuse their friends the proper redress."

The young bandit colored, but made no reply.

Seeing that the duel was at an end, even before it had had a commencement, Fred handed the revolver back to its owner with a contemptuous

glance at Jack, who had brought down upon his head the derision of the whole band.

"You know where the road is," said Captain Silver Belt to Jack.

"What do you mean?"

"We don't want cowards in this camp."

Jack was astonished. He did not look for any treatment of this kind, and for a moment stood bewildered before the captain of the Black Feathers.

"Do you mean that we are to separate here?" he stammered at last.

"I mean nothing else. We don't want cowards with us."

Jack turned upon Fred with a glare of madness in the depths of his eyes.

Captain Silver Belt stood pointing toward the western confines of the camp, and when he had looked at him a moment, he (Jack) walked off with the surliness of a beaten desperado.

"I will make him remember this," he growled under his breath. "I will see that he recalls this incident before his career is ended. I know that the boy intended to kill me the first fire. I saw that in his eye, and I wasn't going to take any chances."

The amused bandits watched him as he walked off, his figure gradually disappearing, and when it had vanished altogether, they laughed outright.

"My case will be settled now," thought Fred. "They will turn upon me and carry out the sentence of the court."

But he was mistaken. A revulsion of feeling in his favor seemed to have taken place, for instead of being conducted to the noose, he was remanded back to the tree where he was left under guard.

In all probability his coolness and bravery had saved his life, though he could not believe that it was for long. He was still in the hands of Captain Silver Belt, and it was more than likely that the bandit would soon play a deadly hand.

He was yet to learn that the expedition to Mesquite had resulted in no success, that Olive had escaped from the men of the border, and that Captain Silver Belt was incensed at the state of affairs, and would renew his oath to wipe out the boy ranch king of the plains.

The sun came up and began to move down the western slope of the sky.

Fred had been treated with some consideration since his coolness in fighting Jack Jordan, and now and then a bandit would steal up to him and enter into conversation.

By this means he was told about Olive's flight, but not that she had been rescued by Mustang Merle.

He was overjoyed to hear of the girl's escape, and doubted not that she was really safe among friends.

The afternoon was half spent when a man was seen by Fred looking down upon the camp from a slight elevation.

This person was mounted, and for some time he was supposed to be one of Captain Silver Belt's own men, but when he rode forward Fred saw that he was quite another person.

The bandits spied him and watched him with some curiosity, for he rode straight toward the camp, and at last drew rein at the very edge of it.

"It is Don Ignace!" said some one.

The Mexican touched his hat at mention of his wild name, and when Captain Silver Belt came forward, the two shook hands and drew close together.

In a little while the Mexican came toward Fred, whom he eyed sharply, and all at once turned upon the leader of the Black Feathers, and exclaimed:

"So this is the chap, eh? He looks like a young hawk. Has he given you any trouble yet?"

Captain Silver Belt shook his head.

"But he will if you don't shut him off soon," he went on. "He is a young fox. I know his father. Long ago we had a brush near one of the forts, and I owe the old captain something for the little scar I carry as a memento of that fight."

The bandit laughed.

"Maybe you would like to take out some vengeance on the son?" he said.

"Nothing would please me more."

"He is yours."

Captain Silver Belt waved his hand toward his captive.

"What, mine?" cried Don Ignace, his face suddenly glowing with true maliciousness. "Do you tell me, captain, that this boy is mine?"

"He is yours!"

The next moment Don Ignace leaned toward Fred and covered him with his dark orbs.

"I will take him. I will show him that I haven't forgotten his father. Come, boy; you shall see something of life beyond Captain Silver Belt's camp."

There was no help for it, and within five minutes the change of masters had been effected and the youth was being conducted from the spot with Don Ignace—grinning, handsome Don Ignace for his escort.

For some time the Mexican did not speak, but continued to conduct his prisoner over the country, now galloping at a rapid gait, but nearly all the time proceeding at a moderate pace.

Fred fell to studying the face of the man into whose hands he had fallen.

It seemed like dropping from the frying-pan into the fire. He had heard of the coolness and cruelties of Don Ignace for whose head there was a standing reward, but had never dreamed that he would some day become his captive.

Don Ignace kept to the broader trail for some time, when he suddenly turned into one not so plain and this they followed some distance.

Fred began to wonder where Don Ignace's camp would be found, and at last rounding a hill, they came in sight of several men seated on horses.

The rough-looking fellows saluted Don Ignace and in a moment Fred was among them.

His arrival called forth expressions of astonishment and when he had been subjected to several rough jokes he was seized by the arm and led away by Don Ignace.

"What is your father worth now?" asked the brigand of the plains.

"No more than when he met you some years ago."

"Ah, no lies, boy."

"You are getting none."

"I am Don Ignace. I know this country and I can hide you so that the whole army would never bring you to light."

"The army would not hunt for me," smiled Fred.

"It would not, eh?" and the bandit seemed surprised.

"It would not."

The robber of the Southwest looked disappointed.

"You came out with a girl who is at Mesquite Ranch?" suddenly exclaimed Don Ignace.

"I was escorting Olive to Mesquite when we were ambushed by Captain Silver Belt's men."

"Would you carry a letter to the girl for me?"

"A letter from you to Olive?"

"Why not?"

The proposition thrilled the young Northerner.

"Let me have it," and he put forth his hand.

"Mind you, boy, it must be placed in her hand," said Don Ignace.

"It shall be taken straight to her."

Don Ignace took a piece of paper from his pocket and bending forward in the saddle, began to write.

"Is he fooling me?" thought Fred. "Does he intend to lift my hopes so high and then dash them to earth? I can't trust this yellow bandit very far. He is as full of tricks as a fox."

But Don Ignace continued to write on as if he had thrown his whole soul into the letter before him and when he had concluded he looked up and folded the letter.

"Take this to the girl. It is a letter from Don Ignace," and he extended his letter which the boy eagerly took.

"You must show me the trail."

"I will," and Don Ignace kept his word by taking Fred beyond the camp and pointing in a certain direction.

"Stick to that trail and you will find Mesquite," said he.

Fred Fuller smiled his thanks and rode forward.

The events of the past few hours seemed a dream to him. He could not realize that he was actually out of the clutches of the bandits; but when he did so he urged his steed over the trail, and rode as if the demons were thundering behind him.

CHAPTER XIII.

OLD JOE KEEPS A PROMISE.

MUSTANG MERLE and his friends prepared to receive another attack from Captain Silver Belt whose failure to take the ranch must have nettled him, and they were sure that another attempt would be made.

It was night when a man entered Tagus City, and proceeded to the Plaza where were situated the drinking-dens of the place.

There was nothing out of the way in the appearing of this person except that he was rather tall and angular.

He had a silent, cat-like tread and when he entered the Square he looked about him and made his way to one of the dens.

Peering in at the open door he noted the inmates and then withdrew.

It was evident that he had come to the border town for a purpose and that a certain person who had been watching his movements thought as much.

The tall man went back to the edge of the place and met there a young Indian who had been waiting for him.

The two came close together and talked in low tones.

"I did not see him but some of his men are there," said the white man.

"Maybe you did not look in all the dens."

"I did not."

"Did you look into the one at the end of the street?"

"No."

"Red Hawk will do that."

"But, if you are discovered, chief—"

"Red Hawk is too sharp for the foxes of the border. He will keep a watchful eye in his head, and when they see him it will not be for long."

The next minute the young Apache glided off and in a moment had vanished.

The white man, who was our old friend, Joe Bundy, remained where he had just joined the red-skin and looked for a little while toward the town.

All at once the stillness was broken by a pistol-shot, and the last of the Bundys sprung up and listened.

"They have found the red! I told him so," he said while he waited for another sound. "He did not play fox well enough for once. It will cost him his life if he is caught prowling here where Captain Silver Belt has many friends."

In another moment a figure came flying toward him, and the old scout, drawing a pistol, waited for it to come up.

When it came along, the hand of Old Joe was thrust forth and closed on the runner.

"Here I am," he said. "In the name of common sense, who are you tryin' to distance?"

Red Hawk, the Indian, stopped and looked into the face of his old companion.

"I found him!" he said with a faint grin.

"Captain Silver Belt?"

"Yes."

"And he let fly at you?"

"No; some one else did."

"Tell me."

Whereupon Red Hawk told in brief the story of his adventure. He had extended his crawl almost to the end of the town for the purpose of discovering if Captain Silver Belt was there at that particular time when he saw a man standing near the last den on the street.

He appeared to be watching for some one, and while the Apache regarded him the door of the den opened and the tall figure of Captain Silver Belt himself came out.

For a moment the young Indian was surprised, but in a little time he saw the other man move, and a six-shooter glittered in his hand.

Believing that the life of Captain Silver Belt was in danger, and they were to abduct him at all hazards, he sprung forward to prevent a crime when the man with a pistol, hearing his step, whirled suddenly and fired at him point-blank, the bullet grazing his face, and for a second throwing him off his guard.

In a flash, as it were, Captain Silver Belt vanished back in the den, and Red Hawk had beaten a hasty retreat.

Joe Bundy listened to this narrative with a good deal of interest.

He wondered greatly who the bandit's enemy could be, but of course the young Indian could not enlighten him.

"Listen!" he said, clutching Red Hawk's arm. "They are wide awake back yonder. We will not get to steal Captain Silver Belt to-night."

The Apache listened with a curious face and the two heard the confused sounds of human voices.

All at once some one was seen coming toward them.

Red Hawk thrust Joe back and crouched on the ground like a panther.

"It is the bandit of the border—the very man we want!" suddenly whispered the Yankee.

On, on came the person so closely regarded by the two friends, and when he reached a spot

opposite Red Hawk, they sprung at him and he was caught unawares.

"It is only turning the tables a little," said Joe, as the man struggled. "You will save your breath by keeping quiet."

The captured one glared at the two and let an oath escape him.

"To the horses, Red Hawk! We have caged the eagle and all we want is to get away with the bird."

Captain Silver Belt held back a moment, but a cocked revolver soon brought him into submission and he quietly said:

"You know how to play fox as well as other people. But you must remember that the game is not yet played out."

Two horses were discovered near by and the sullen prisoner was ordered to mount one, which he did, and in a moment all three were riding off.

The capture of the renowned bandit of the border had been so neatly accomplished that both Joe and Red Hawk had need to congratulate themselves as they rode along.

For a long time Captain Silver Belt said nothing, but maintained a sullen silence.

"Captain," said Old Joe, "do you ever eat paper?"

The bandit was startled by the absurdity of the question.

"What do you mean?"

The tall scout took a bit of crumpled paper from his pocket and held it up before his eyes in the faint moonlight.

"This is the paper you left on the porch the night you stampeded the cattle and I swore that I would cram it down your throat some day. I think my time has come now and I'll proceed to carry out my promise, so hold still, please—"

But Captain Silver Belt fell back and began to struggle.

"It's got to be eaten!" continued Joe. "I'm a man of my word and when I set out to do a thing I generally do it."

The power that lay in the Yankee's limbs was too much for even the agile man of the border and in the end he forced the paper into the bandit's mouth and shut his jaws behind it.

"Thar, I feel better," ejaculated Old Joe. "You kin swaller it or spit it out just as you like. That's what I call eatin' one's own words."

The mad look that filled Captain Silver Belt's eyes was the only answer Joe received and if his hands had been free there would have been a struggle to the death.

The three rode on and the house of Mesquite came in sight at last, lying in the moonlight.

The porch was reached and the guard who challenged the little party uttered a cry when he saw that one of the horses carried double.

"We've got him," said Joe.

The alarm was instantly sounded and Mustang Merle stood face to face with his old enemy.

Captain Silver Belt was taken across the threshold into a room where he stood erect with the mien of an eagle and glared at the boy ranch king with all the fury of his wild nature.

"There can be peace between us," said Mustang Merle, pointing at length to a paper which he had placed on the table. "There are the terms I have drawn up and it remains for you to sign them."

The captain of the Black Feathers stepped forward and read the treaty, for it was nothing else.

His lips curled proudly and he threw a look of defiance at the Boy Rancher and his friends.

"Peace on those terms? Never!" he cried.

His figure straightened and he fell back with a curse on his tongue.

"It is the only chance. If you refuse to sign you will be tried in this house by a court made up for that purpose."

"Try me!"

The coolness of the man was something amazing.

Once more he leaned forward and looked at the terms submitted in the treaty on the table.

"The pen!" he said, seeming to bite his rether lip.

Joe Bundy stepped forward and placed a pen in his hand.

"I can't sign, tied as I am," said the outlaw. Mustang Merle made a sign and the bonds were severed.

Every eye was fastened upon the famed rider of the Southwest.

He stood at the table with the pen in his hand as if about to sign the paper lying ready for him.

Those by whom he was watched gripped six-

shooters in their hands and were ready to cover him at the slightest show of treachery.

Captain Silver Belt lowered the pen until it almost touched the sheet, but all at once he dropped it and leaped toward where Olive was a silent spectator of the scene.

He seized the fair girl and lifted her from the floor. He whirled and in a jiffy was holding her between himself and the pistols of her astonished friends.

It was the work of the tenth part of a second and Captain Silver Belt had calculated the play to a nicety and the lookers on were thunderstruck.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BLACK FEATHER'S FLIGHT.

"DROP the girl!" cried the last of the Bundys, but Captain Silver Belt showed no intentions of doing this.

Three revolvers were leveled at him, but he held the Boy Rancher's cousin in such a position that to fire at him would be to endanger her life, and he knew that he had secured an advantage if not a decided victory.

Still clutching Olive, he moved backward toward the door.

Beyond the porch stood the horses which Joe and Red Hawk had ridden to Tagus, and once on the back of one with his captive he might bid defiance to the men of the ranch.

But an unseen danger lay in his path and it soon manifested itself.

The door behind the bandit opened suddenly and a youth of splendid proportions threw himself forward.

It was Fred Fuller, whom we saw last making his way to Mesquite with a note to Olive from Don Ignace.

The youth came into the room in the nick of time.

Realizing the situation at a glance, he threw himself upon Captain Silver Belt and that worthy was forced back against his will, when Red Hawk leaped to Fred's assistance and Olive was released.

But despite this sudden advantage, the victory over the bandit was not yet won.

To the strength of a giant he united the agility of a cat, and the struggle he made was desperate.

Fred was torn loose and flung across the room; Red Rawk received a blow from the clinched fist of the outlaw and ere Merle and Joe could reseize him he had reached the door and in a flash was gone.

Yes, with a defiant laugh Captain Silver Belt had disappeared and the astonished tenants of the ranch heard his footsteps on the porch!

Old Joe bounded to the door and gained it in time to see a man gallop away, but he sent a bullet after the cool bandit ere he turned back to the excited group.

Captain Silver Belt's escape was so astonishing that those whom it affected could not fully realize what had happened for some time.

"It will be swift war now," said Merle at last. "We shall now have the final struggle for existence and it will be a bloody one."

"Let it come! I've had the satisfaction of cramming some of his own words down his throat, and I want another chance at him."

Joe Bundy smiled triumphantly when he thought of his exploit, but it was not much, viewed in the light of Captain Silver Belt's successful play.

The night passed without any further incident worth recording and the new day came.

Mustang Merle went out and looked over his acres and then walked down to the old mine.

In the depths he took an oath that he would clear the earth of his old-time foe, and then went back to the house.

Olive, pale from her exciting adventure with the bandit, met him in the room and drew him to the window.

"You don't think of compromising with this man, do you, Cousin Merle?" the fair girl asked.

"With Captain Silver Belt? You do not know me!"

"I am glad of this. You will meet him when he comes and fight him to the finish."

"I shall do nothing else, Olive, while this man is our living foe there can be no security at Mesquite. He intends to carry out his vow or perish in the attempt. But the letter Fred brought you? You promised to show it to me."

The girl blushed and drew from her bosom a letter which she handed to Mustang Merle.

The boy read it with rising color, and then looked into the young girl's face.

"This is almost enough to provoke a laugh," he said. "It is simply a declaration of love

from Don Ignace, the bandit. You haven't sent him your answer, Olive."

Olive Oram blushed again.

"Ought I to do so?" she asked. "Indeed, it would be courtesy, wouldn't it?" and she ran laughing from the room.

Merle waited for her to return, and when she came back holding a letter in her hand, he took it with a smile.

"That will do, but I fear it will not please the yellow bandit. We will have one of the men take it to the spot designated in his letter and he will call for it in time."

Mustang Merle took the letter which he carried to one of the herders with instructions to take it to a certain spot and the man rode off.

Meantime Captain Silver Belt had proceeded over the rising ground at breakneck speed and was nearing one of his camps securely hidden from the keen eyes of the foe.

His handsome face had the glow of a demon's and when he dashed among his own and told in a few brief sentences the adventures through which he had lately passed, there was a universal cry for revenge.

The whole band demanded to be led against Mesquite, swearing in their rage that they would not leave one timber attached to another nor a spear of grass unburned.

To these threats Captain Silver Belt sat and looked at their makers.

"I want to find the person who fired at the Indian at Tagus," he said. "He was on the watch for me and would have taken my life if the red had not interfered. I know the skulker. He said he would get even with me for the banishment."

"It was Jack Jordan!" cried a dozen voices.

"It was the young rascal of the plains—the villain whom I banished on account of his cowardice. Jack Jordan is outlawed from this moment. I offer two hundred dollars for him, dead or alive."

At this juncture a form moved in the tall grass at the edge of the camp.

The person lying there with his eyes fastened on the leader of the Black Feathers was Jack Jordan himself, and he had heard the decree of outlawry that had just been passed.

"You will catch the rabbit before you eat him," said the youth with a smile. "I understand your tactics, Captain Silver Belt. I was on the watch when the young Apache came between, and with his companion, Old Joe Bundy, succeeded in capturing you. I don't intend to forget how you outlawed me, nor why you did so. I will get even yet, and the war you are waging against Mesquite may take a sudden turn against your cause."

Jack did not quit his place of concealment until he could do so without being discovered.

He glided through the grass like a snake, and when some distance off arose and ran forward.

In a little while he had vanished entirely, and the bandits were none the wiser for his trick.

An hour later he stood in a ravine in the timber, looking at something moving up it at a snail's pace.

"What on earth can the yellow dog be doing here?" he asked himself.

He was looking down upon Don Ignace, who was creeping up the ravine with his little Mexican eyes on the alert.

All at once he dodged into a recess and found a letter there.

Jack could see how the find flushed Don Ignace's face, but the following minute it clouded.

The contents of the letter displeased him.

"I will show her that I am not to be despised," growled the Mexican. "I wrote her a neat missive, and the boy whose life I saved took it to her. And this is her answer. It is too bad, and almost sets me wild."

Don Ignace danced about like a man distracted, but suddenly ceasing his demonstrations, he grew cool and shook his fist toward Mesquite.

When he moved on again he approached the youth's place of concealment, and Jack, with a grin on his face, shoved his revolver forward.

"Halt, Don Ignace!" he cried.

In an instant the Mexican bandit stood still with his hand on the butt of his own weapon, and trying to make out the half-hidden face of the person who had spoken.

"Ho, it is Jack—Jack, the Cowboy!" he exclaimed, and then he came forward fearlessly.

When Jack rose up Don Ignace produced the letter, and after the cowboy had read it, said:

"You see how a mere girl treats me. I am disgusted, but I want to show her that my affections are not to be trifled with. Won't you go in with me, Jack? We will play a hand peculiarly our own, and will divide the profits. I am Don Ignace and you are Jack. There's

much for us to win—gold for you and a wife for me."

The young outlaw laughed.

"You forget that I have known Miss Olive for years," he said in all seriousness. "You must remember, Don Ignace, that I may think a good deal of Mustang Merle's pretty cousin—"

"You?" stammered the Mexican, falling back and almost losing his equilibrium. "In the name of Saint Louis, what will I hear next?"

There was no reply on Jack's part, but he could not keep from smiling at Don Ignace's astonishment.

"I shan't ask you to form a partnership with me," cried the Mexican. "I will work out my love-making to my own satisfaction and if any one steps between Don Ignace and the American girl, he will pay for the intrusion."

"There is a barrier between you and Olive now."

"What do you mean?"

"The combined strength of Mesquite is the bulwark that protects the girl."

In an instant Don Ignace's face grew dark, and swearing that even Mesquite should not prevail against him, he turned and left Jack alone by the ravine.

"You'll never bite the golden apple, old fellow," cried Jack after him. "I am liable to win the girl myself."

CHAPTER XV.

THE SPY'S DOOM.

THE capture of Captain Silver Belt and his subsequent escape were two incidents certain to exasperate him against the boy owner of Mesquite Ranch.

In anticipation of an attack Mustang Merle made preparations to resist him when he should come and none but the trustiest men were placed on guard.

Tagus City soon learned of the true state of affairs, but as it was one of the captain's strongholds and was expected to stand by him, for there he sometimes spent the ill-gotten gains of raid and foray, the young rancher did not look for any help or sympathy in that direction.

After his escape Captain Silver Belt went quietly to work to recruit his ranks and a dozen new men were taken into the band of the Black Feathers and all swore to stand by its leader to the last extremity.

Late one night, the third one after the last events, a number of well-mounted men were seen riding through the moonlight toward the ranch.

They rode as silently as ghosts and no one not seeing them would have known that they were abroad.

At their head rode the leader of the band, his dark hair blowing back over his shoulders on the night wind and himself the very picture of Adonis in the saddle.

Everybody knew where Mesquite stood.

It had acquired a name second to no other ranch in the region and the battles which its gallant young owner had fought for its preservation had rendered it famous everywhere.

The Black Feathers far outnumbered those who were at the ranch and it was with faces flushed with expectation that the horsemen galloped over the ground and rapidly placed miles between them and their goal.

Captain Silver Belt turned to a rider on his right and said with a smile:

"The last tussle, Gideon. We will come back over this same ground with rich spoil hanging from our saddles and the ranch that has defied us so long will be such only in name."

"I hope so. The men are almost tired of riding back and forth without getting any nearer the prize."

"This time they will reach it. The spy we have placed on the ranch is playing his part to perfection and we shall see his signal at the proper point."

The bandits rode on until the hills that overlooked Mesquite were reached, when they halted and taking Gilded Gid with him, Captain Silver Belt rode on to reconnoiter.

Suddenly the leader stopped and pointed to a light which had just leaped into being.

"Sam is at work," said he. "There goes his match and we are on time."

The light burned a little while and then went out, but it had lasted long enough to convey certain intelligence to the captain of the bandits.

But something not on the hills was occurring at the ranch itself, and leaving the bandits on the hill let us cross the space that separates them from the houses and see what is taking place.

It is true that within the last forty-eight hours Mustang Merle had sworn into his service a young man who professed to be willing to fight

against Captain Silver Belt without suspecting that the new ally was that very scoundrel's spy.

Silver Sam was a cool, calculating rascal who knew how to carry out the commands of his superior and no sooner had he become a member of Merle's band than he began to discover the weak points of the ranch.

This took a good deal of caution, for from the first he had to work against a number of watchful eyes, among them those of Red Hawk and Joe Bundy and he realized that all the time he was working in the shadow of death.

Silver Sam knew almost to the minute when Captain Silver Belt and his outlaws would appear on the hill and was ready with his signal.

He quietly took out a match and stationing himself at a certain place proceeded to light his pipe as though there was nothing out of the way.

But the manner in which he threw the match to the ground told the story of the signal and no sooner was it extinguished than he looked toward the hill and smiled.

"It's all right," said Sam to himself. "I have played my game to a demonstration and the plan is a success. The old captain isn't looking for to-night and when he comes he will find the ranch an easy prize."

But crouching near Sam at that very moment was a figure which he did not see.

He might have seen it if his eyes had been a little keener, but as it was, he saw nothing but the hill looming up between him and the stars and there he knew the bandits were.

"The white hoss is lame," said a voice behind Sam when he had moved a short distance from the spot where he had shown the signal.

The bandit spy started as if a serpent had hissed at his heels, and he found himself confronted by Old Joe.

There was nothing suspicious about the old Yankee's looks and in a moment he had placed the spy at his ease.

"I wish you'd come down and look at the white hoss," continued the scout. "He's in the stable and I heard you bragging that you knew more about hosses than anybody else."

"Of course I'll go," and the next moment Sam was following Joe toward the stables.

When near them the old Yankee turned and caught the spy by the wrist.

"I'm the hoss what's lame," said he, with a malicious grin. "Yes, I'm the animal that needs attention."

Silver Sam lost color and seeing that he could do nothing else but stammer, did so for a second.

"We won't go to the stable just now, but to the house," resumed Bundy.

Fearful that all was up with him, the spy turned white and made a slight effort to disengage himself from Joe, but the grip of the long yellow hand was too much for him and he did not repeat the trial.

Old Joe took his man to the house and when he had opened the door, pushing Sam ahead, he laughed aloud.

"The slickest bit of work I ever did. Caught him as nice as you please."

Mustang Merle, writing at his desk, looked up and lowered the pen.

Silver Sam cast a look toward the door and ground his teeth.

"He struck a match at one end of the house and threw it to the ground in the funniest manner you ever see'd. I never saw anything just like it. It meant something."

Not a word from Sam.

The fellow found himself covered by the keen eyes of the Boy Rancher and stood as erect as a pine.

He had regained his old composure and not a muscle quivered.

"Are you going to confess?" suddenly asked the young ranch king.

"Confess what?"

"That lighting of the match was a signal."

"I confess nothing. One ought to have the privilege of lighting his pipe whenever he pleases, and I don't see how an act of that sort could be a signal."

"I'll just search him if you say so," said Joe, moving forward. "I have had my peepers on him ever since he came to the ranch. It struck me at first that I had seen himself before, and all at once the whole truth came to me, and I knew just where it was. You hain't forgotten the little Mexican who was killed at Monteverde two years ago by a man who went by the name of Sorocco Syl, have you?"

Sam started just a little.

"I know you now; I know that you are Sorocco Syl, the man for whom the authorities

offered a little sum in dust, but you have changed a good deal, and if you are Syl, you will have a scar under the hair on your neck."

Old Joe took a step toward the prisoner in the middle of the room and was about to look for the scar, when Sam's hand flew out and the tall Yankee was pushed back.

But, quick as a flash Joe returned to the attack, and despite Sam's strength, the locks were seized and pulled aside, exposing a red scar, at sight of which Mustang Merle smiled.

"I'll now go through him like a dose of salts," said Joe, and the next minute he had Sam pinned against the wall while with the hand not thus employed he was searching his pockets.

Merle stood near with a cocked revolver in his hand, and while Joe searched the prisoner, he watched him like an eagle.

Next to Silver Sam's heart was found a flat package which the fingers of Old Joe drew forth and threw upon the table.

Mustang Merle looked at it and discovered it to contain a complete map of the several mines belonging to the ranch, all drawn by the hand of Silver Sam.

The spy looked at the evidences of his guilt, but did not open his mouth.

Nothing more was found on his person and when Joe Bundy announced that he was done, he turned to Sam and said:

"Whom did you signal?"

There was no reply.

"In cases of this kind I have been both judge and jury. I have all the evidence I need and I will now proceed to carry out the sentence of Judge Bundy's court."

There was no mistaking the meaning of these words.

The last one had barely left the old scout's lips when the figure of a young Indian bounded into the room and halted near the group.

It was Red Hawk.

"Always on hand," grinned Old Bundy, greeting his faithful pard. "We are going to pay a spy for his services. Come, Red Hawk."

Mustang Merle said nothing to check the march of the executioners.

He had no sympathy for the man who had taken service under his banners for the purpose of betraying him to the foe.

Silver Sam was led away between Red Hawk and Joe Bundy, and the door shut behind them.

The three crossed the grassy plat in front of the ranch-house, passed the stables, and went toward the mine and were lost to view.

They halted at the mouth of the bonanza. All was dark within. Old Joe drew a match across the wall and held it above his head.

As the blaze shot upward it revealed the long corridor and showed all three the dull gray stones of the wall.

All at once Old Joe struck a portion of the wall and a door swung open.

Beyond the portal the darkness of Egypt reigned.

"Forward!" said the Yankee, pushing Sam on. "They won't know where to look for you when they come."

Silver Sam looked back into the merciless faces of his enemies and shrugged his broad shoulders.

At that moment a series of yells was heard.

"The bandits have come!" cried Joe Bundy, and hurling Sam into the cell, he struck the iron button again and the door shut.

"The spy is safe till Gabriel blows," cried he, seizing Red Hawk's wrist. "Now let's go back and fight for life and the young master."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DRAMA UNDERGROUND.

The yell which reached the ears of Silver Sam's captor told them the spy had done his work well.

When they rushed from the mine they heard shouts that informed them that the final fight for life had begun, and standing for a moment at the mouth of the mine, they listened to the yells which grew louder and louder as the Black Feathers came over the hill to the attack.

Mustang Merle at the door of the ranch-house, heard the first shout, and turning to Olive who was near, caught her hand and led her toward the secret opening in the wall.

It was not the first time the beauty had sought the shelter of the underground passage and she knew where safety lay, for, bidding Mustang Merle good-bye, she disappeared through the door and it swung back to its place.

Merle and Fred sprung toward the porch and as the horses came down over the ground in front of the house, they saw two figures come into view and Joe Bundy and Red Hawk, the two faithfuls, were "on deck."

Meantime the little band of ranchmen was not idle for it had formed at a good point and did not hesitate to send a lot of cold lead into the ranks of the bandits.

But the volley, however well-intended, did not do much damage, for Captain Silver Belt's ranks opened as if by magic and the members of the band came on.

They contented themselves with riding round the house, firing at whatever they could single out for a target, but drew off again and reformed.

Olive meantime had reached the room underground, and was waiting for the noise of the fight which she was sure she could hear.

She was not disappointed, for all at once she heard the loud reports of firearms, and stood listening, her heart in her throat and out of breath.

For some time the noise of the fight for life saluted her ears, when it suddenly grew still, and she did not know what to think.

She felt that the raiders of the border outnumbered Merle and his friends, but she had great faith in those who surrounded the young rancher.

If Captain Silver Belt won, then she was lost. If he carried the day, she would be at the mercy of the brigand of the Southwest, and she knew what his mercy meant.

When the noises of conflict had ceased, Olive went to the furthest end of the corridor, and placing the lamp in a niche in the wall, sat down.

All at once her gaze became riveted upon something that seemed to shine in the stone, and the more she looked at it the greater became her curiosity.

At last she arose and approached it.

When quite near she discovered it to be a button-like object, which seemed to move back into the wall when she touched it.

Was there a secret apartment beyond the wall?

Impelled by a feeling she could not overcome, she pressed the button and fell back with a light cry as a door moved inward, and she was looking into a small room which seemed entirely devoid of anything.

Olive picked up the lamp and entered the place.

Almost immediately after quitting the corridor, the door behind her swung shut, and she found herself inclosed by walls of stone.

But the next moment she uttered an exclamation of astonishment, and leaning forward held the lamp against the wall, while she read an inscription written there by some unknown hand.

Olive read:

"Let the finder of this writing keep to the right along the wall. It is death to move in any other direction."

She shrunk back and held her breath.

She could not go back, and the only thing left was to move on as directed by the writing on the stone.

Taking courage, the girl went forward and saw leading along the floor of the wall on the right hand, a pathway which seemed to her the way to safety.

On, on she went, deeper and deeper into that mysterious old mine totally unknown to her.

She no longer heard the noises of the last battle for existence.

They had grown still, or else she had passed beyond them, and she hoped for the best.

Olive did not pause until she found herself at the end of the corridor.

Her lamp had flickered and gone out and she was in total darkness.

The terror of her situation seemed to freeze the blood in her veins.

A long time Olive stood there, not daring to advance in the gloom, but feeling that it would be death to go on she was in the act of turning back when she heard a voice.

She was not the sole person underground!

Hugging the wall, Olive waited for a repetition of the sound and when the voice was again heard she almost fell to the ground.

"This is the old place, for the writings on the walls tell me as much," said the voice.

"But one has to be careful here for he don't know whither he is going, nor in what direction these corridors lead."

"But, captain—"

"Hush, don't 'captain' me here," was the sudden interruption. "I know what I am

about and you have nothing to do but to obey me in every particular."

"Why don't you strike a match?"

"And betray ourselves? No! The fight is going on for the ranch and we are the ones who will reap the golden harvest. I have known of this place for years, but this is the first opportunity I have had of testing the knowledge."

"But come what may, I won't go on another step with out a light."

"Coward!"

"That's all right, Captain Don. I may be a coward, but I will not risk my head in the dark another minute."

Olive wondered what would happen next, when all at once a light burst forth and she saw two men.

One in particular was a perfect Apollo in yellow, tall and very handsome with a yellow sash about his waist.

"That is not Captain Silver Belt," thought Olive as she looked at this man. "He is a brigand all the same, and, of course, my enemy."

He stood near her and she could see his dark eyes and arch smile as he gave commands to the man at his side.

"Heavens! look yonder. A ghost!" suddenly roared the smaller man and with a wild cry he turned and fled as if he had a dozen demons yelping at his heels.

"A ghost, you coward!" cried the other, and he leaned toward Olive with the blazing match in his hand.

Suddenly he, too, fell back with but little color in his face and stood against the wall staring at the motionless figure of Olive Oram, who could hardly repress a smile for the abject terror which seemed to have taken possession of his soul.

"In heaven's name who is it, anyhow?" gasped the yellow-sashed bandit.

By this time Olive had seen more of him, and all at once seeming to guess his identity, went forward and held out her hands imploringly.

"I am Olive Oram. I have come too far down this corridor. You are Don Ignace."

The man laughed as the name fell upon his ears.

"I am Captain Don," he said. "I have been hoping that fortune would throw you in my way to enable me to be of service to you. You are the young girl who replied to my letter."

Olive did not know what to say.

"You rejected my suit. You would not listen to the love-making of Captain Don, but now you have fallen into his hands and—"

Merle's cousin recoiled with a cry and was seen to throw a hand toward the folds of her dress.

"No harm is intended," Don Ignace hastened to say. "He will assist the young lady by every means in his power. He is her friend and now that the battle has gone against the ranch and the life of Mustang Merle is not worth a breath, he will shield her from the rancher's enemies."

It was a well-chosen speech, but it did not draw the girl to the Mexican.

His words had driven a chill to her heart. The battle over and Captain Silver Belt triumphant?

"Tell me the truth, Don Ignace," she cried. "You have said that the bandits have gained the day. It cannot be!"

"Go up and see," was the reply. "No, you need not risk your life among the Black Feathers. It is all over and the banners of the bandits are crowned with victory."

Olive stood like a statue of fear in the light of the later matches.

Don Ignace came forward with the tread of a cat.

His face broke into smiles of pleasure as he put one foot before the other, all the time watching the girl like the serpent watches the bird it harms.

Suddenly a determined expression crossed the young girl's face.

"This man must not touch me," she said. "He is as merciless and dangerous as Captain Silver Belt."

On, on came the man with the golden sash.

"Stand where you are!" cried Olive and that moment there flashed before the grinning face of Don Ignace a dagger from which he recoiled without ceremony.

"What would you do, child?" he asked. "You may be striking your best friend. This is the time when you need help, and if you drive the needle-pointed blade to Don Ignace's heart, you may lose an ally."

"No; you are all alike. They call you the bandit of the Golden Sash and you never befriend woman."

Don Ignace crossed himself solemnly.
"They sometimes lie even on the devil," he said. "I am not as black as I've been painted."
"But I dare not trust you."

Don Ignace turned and called to the man who had deserted him.

The echo of his words was the only sound that reached his ears: but footfalls were soon heard, and the deserter came sneaking back.

His face had not yet regained its natural color, and he shook like a leaf.

"Take charge of the lady," said Don Ignace, pointing at Olive. "She won't let me touch her."

The girl straightened and threw up the dagger.

"You adyance at your peril," she said, undauntedly,

The minion stopped and looked back at his master.

"Forward!" cried Don Ignace, angrily.

Once more the man took a step toward Olive, but the menace of the blade was too much for him.

"Fool and coward!" suddenly roared the Mexican, and leaping forward he caught the girl's arm as it descended and held it in mid-air.

Olive writhed and attempted to break from his grasp, but he held her firm.

"You need a friend, and you must trust Don Ignace," he said. "He hates every bone in Captain Silver Belt's body."

And Olive went down over the stones with his hand at her wrist.

CHAPTER XVII.

RED HAWK ROBS A ROBBER.

CAPTAIN SILVER BELT soon discovered that taking the ranch by assault was apt to prove a difficult job.

He found that the faithful defenders of the place were men who had promised to stand by Mustang Merle through thick and thin, and that if he wanted to carry out his designs, he would have a hard battle before him.

Not content with having charged down upon the buildings, he resolved to fire the long grass that grew in one of the pastures near the ranch-house, but in this he was disappointed, for a well-directed volley drove off his firers with some loss, and he fell back for consultation with his officers.

This afforded Mustang Merle and his men a breathing spell, during which the young rancher opened the door leading to the underground corridors where he had left Olive, and ran down the main one.

When he reached the spot where he expected to find his cousin, he found it untenanted, and for a moment he stood bewildered in the passage.

Suddenly he heard footsteps behind him, and another person came toward him.

Merle drew his revolver and waited.

When the other came up he was discovered to be Fred Fuller, who had followed the Boy Rancher to the place, in hopes of protecting Olive from Captain Silver Belt and his minions.

"She is not here," said Merle, waving his hand at the nakedness of the subterranean chamber.

"In Heaven's name, what has become of her?"

"We must search the place," and the two started off with a light, moving on and on until they reached the room where the young girl had touched the button in the wall, disclosing the chamber where she encountered Don Ignace and his companion.

The mystery had grown too deep for even the young ranch king.

At this juncture sounds of heavy fighting were heard in the cavern, and Merle went back.

"Leave me here," said Fred. "I will not give up yet. Go back and, if you can, beat off the bandit of the border. I will find Olive if she is to be found at all."

Once more the youth went to work examining every part of the room, and subjecting the very walls to a close inspection.

He was on the act of quitting the spot, when the iron button which had attracted Olive met his eye.

In a moment he was at the wall, and a sharp blow caused the concealed door to open.

Fred found himself in the new chamber, but all was dark.

With a match in his hand he went on, looking in every direction, and at last stood on the verge of a pit, around which the narrow trail seemed to lead.

Here the very walls seemed to convey to his ears every sound of the battle raging elsewhere.

Fred stood against the wall and listened, wondering at the singular effects of the sounds.

He heard the reports of the Winchesters of the combatants, heard, too, the cheers of the ranchers as the bandits were momentarily driven off, and at last all grew still.

Had the battle ended?

The young man moved from the wall and resumed his journey.

Presently he thought he heard voices and stopped.

"Some one is near me," he said to himself. "I am not alone underground."

All at once there came into view a man who carried a torch in his hand.

Fred Fuller raised his revolver and waited.

But the man, whose face was dark, stopped, and the youth did not fire.

"It's the queerest thing in the world if it is true," he heard the man say in audible tones.

"The powder may not be good any longer, it seems to have been in place so long, but some one laid a train in this old mine years and years ago, and long before Mustang Merle took possession of the ranch. I wonder if it would go off if one were to touch a match to it? Captain Don and his young charge have escaped, and I have been commanded to apply the match."

These words thrilled Fred Fuller.

As yet he had not been discovered by the speaker though he was standing close to him, but every moment was dangerous.

He saw the man take a piece of paper from his pocket.

Rolling it up, he threw it on the ground and stooped with the torch.

"He is going to fire the old train he has discovered," cried the youth. "If it ignites, all is lost and the mine may be blown up."

The next moment Fred sprung forward and the man with the light was informed of his presence by the command he issued.

"Hands up!" cried Fred.

In an instant the man straightened with a sharp cry and the two stood face to face.

The face of the stranger was white and red by turns. He stood like a statue before Olive's friend.

Fred continued to advance and in a second halted in front of him with the pistol in his very face.

"Who are you?" demanded the youth.

"The man left behind," was the answer, accompanied by a smile.

"Why are you here?"

"Couldn't you see?"

"You were in the act of firing the train?"

"Perhaps."

"You were serving some one."

"My master."

"Captain Silver Belt?"

"Don Ignace!"

Fred started at the name. This man was not Captain Silver Belt's follower, but the slave of the man with the golden sash.

"Show me the way out by the way you came in," said the young man.

"That would be betraying Don Ignace."

"No matter who is betrayed; you must show the way or you will remain here for all time."

Fred had the fellow at the mercy of his revolver and he was not disposed to be lenient.

For half a second the bandit stood undecided; he was looking into Fred's face as if to gauge his temper when, seeing as it were that he was not to be trifled with, he started forward with a growl.

The two walked some distance, the bandit in the advance, when all at once a breath of air touched the youth's cheeks.

"Here we are," said Don Ignace's man. "Yonder is the ranch and you can see the trees between you and the sky."

This was true, as a glance told Fred, but he did not look at them long.

"Olive fell into the hands of Don Ignace?" he asked.

A smile was the sole reply.

"You know whither she has been taken?"

No answer.

"Though to a certain degree I owe my life to your master, I am under no obligations to his slave," Fred went on. "I will take your life where you stand if you do not at once reveal the whereabouts of Olive Oram and her captor."

The bandit was inclined to smile at this, for he leaned forward and looked Fred in the face.

But he saw no mercy there; only the cool eyes of the youth who, having known Olive for years, had become her lover.

"The truth!" cried Fred, determinedly.

"I don't know as I ought to keep it back. Don Ignace has never been the best of friends to me, though I have followed him like a fool. I have

been his slave, as you say, for there is something attractive about him, and I could not help serving him, though I never gave him any love. They are over yonder, but how far away I cannot tell you."

The hand of the bandit pointed toward some hills just visible under the stars.

"Is Don Ignace mounted?"

"He is."

The heart of Fred Fuller for a moment sunk within him.

"I can go back to the stables if they have not fallen into the hands of Captain Silver Belt and get a horse."

"That would consume time; and, besides, Captain Silver Belt may have captured the ranch."

"But one cannot think of overtaking Don Ignace without a horse."

The revolver dropped at Fred Fuller's side and he turned away.

"Your master is to be followed to the end," he said, with a parting look at the man. "He is to be dogged until he gives up his captive."

"You may find your hands full, young man."

Fred assured the bandit that he had counted all the dangers and was not daunted by them.

In a moment they had separated, and he was running toward the ranch. All was now strangely still.

If the battle was over, it was difficult to tell who had gained the day.

Fred reached a certain spot near the buildings when a long figure sprung into view, and in a second he was covered by a rifle from which he recoiled with a cry.

"Come on, or drop where you are, with one of Doctor Bundy's pills in your anatomy!"

Fred bounded on with an exclamation of joy.

"What, you?" shouted the old Yankee, dropping the rifle and catching the youth's hand. "We are having a singular breathing-spell, but that's no tellin' how long it will last. What's up?"

Fred hurriedly told the story of Olive's disappearance, when Old Joe broke in:

"The gal's safe enough!"

"Safe?" echoed the youth. "Olive safe?"

"She's yonder at the house. Red Hawk pounced upon Don Ignace like a wolf, and he had to give her up. It was the red's way, you know, and when he came back from a little spying trip and showed up with the yaller-sashed rascal, we all nearly looked our eyes out."

"Good for Red Hawk!" cried Fred. "But how has the fight gone?"

"It's with us, so far. The foe have pulled off for repairs, and are over yonder somewhar getting ready for the next move."

"There will be more fighting?"

"More deviltry, I guess. We gave them several good volleys, and tumbled some from their saddles, but this is the last battle, and if Captain Silver Belt fails to-night, he fails forever."

Joe Bundy and Fred went toward the house, and in a minute stood in the presence of Olive.

Near by, tied with cords, Don Ignace leaned against the wall, looking crestfallen and humiliated, now and then glancing at Olive, but for the most part bestowing his glances upon the young Indian who had baffled him.

"What are you going to do with him?" asked Fred, turning to Merle.

"The battle will determine his fate," was the reply, and at that moment everybody sprung forward, for something had fallen against the door, and Mustang Merle, looking out, beheld the dead body of a bandit lying on the porch.

Lights were carried out, and all looked down into the face of the dead man, while not a single person spoke.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BANDIT'S LAST SHOT.

THE fall of the bandit against the door of the ranch was a mystery that seemed to hold all spellbound in its presence.

Mustang Merle discovered at last that in one of the clinched hands of the dead was a bit of paper.

The fingers were pried apart and the paper secured.

"This man had turned against his chief," explained the young rancher, looking up. "He was followed to the house and killed before he could deliver what he held in his hand."

"A traitor?" echoed Joe Bundy. "I thought Captain Silver Belt's men were all true."

"That is Dick Salvo, a man who never served anyone faithfully. I once dismissed him from my employ for cowardice, and would have killed him if he had not disappeared."

The speaker was Don Ignace who was looking down into the face of the dead, and all eyes were turned upon him.

Meantime Mustang Merle, looking again at the paper, which the dead bandit had brought, whispered something to Red Hawk, and in a flash the young Apache vanished.

Let us follow the Indian.

He ran across the open space behind the house and sprung into a gully near the mine. He was quite alone, and when he gained the middle of the gully, he stopped and listened.

"Did the paper lie?" Red Hawk asked himself. "Is it true that reinforcements are on the way to us—that they will soon come through the gulch?"

For some time Red Hawk stood where he was and then his trained ears caught the sound of horses.

Bounding forward again he went deeper into the opening in the earth and did not stop until he reached the high ground above the gulch.

There he stood, listening, with a smile of satisfaction.

Troops were coming over the high ground. He could hear the clank of sabers and the other noises that denote the approach of cavalry.

Red Hawk waited till something dark loomed up in his front; then he ran on and suddenly threw up his hand.

"Halt!" cried a voice in tones of sharp command.

In an instant a hundred horses came to a halt and the clicking of carbine locks was heard.

Red Hawk had found the soldiers!

A brief consultation took place between the officer in command and the red-skin and then all went on toward the ranch.

Red Hawk conducted the major through the lines and Merle met him on the porch.

"We know from the warning of the man who was followed to the house and killed, perhaps by Captain Silver Belt himself, just where the enemy is," answered Merle. "You have brought force enough to annihilate the bandits of the border, but I ask permission to lead the charge."

The officer drew back and looked at Merle, astonished.

"I cannot grant that permission."

"Then, we reject your offers of assistance!"

"But—"

"We reject them!" and the eyes of the young rancher seemed to emit sparks of fire.

The officer looked at the boy and said something no one heard.

"You may follow if you like, but you shall not have the honor of wiping out Captain Silver Belt on the ranch without my help," firmly declared Merle.

Half a minute later the ranchers were moving out toward the spot where Captain Silver Belt was supposed to be—grim determination enthroned on every face.

But, the bandits were ready; and when the men of the ranch came down upon them with the fury of a whirlwind, they stood their ground and gave blow for blow.

Presently the troops dashed in, when the outlaws turned and fled despite the efforts of Silver Belt to rally them.

They were closely followed. Some were sabered by the troopers, while others were ridden down by Merle and his men, but some few escaped to tell the tale of dire disaster to the shattered band.

When the battle was over and the victors came to count the spoils, it was discovered that Captain Silver Belt had escaped.

"This isn't the last of the bad bandit of them all," averred Merle. "We will hear more of him, and will have to fight him once more."

"Unless we cage him without a battle," remarked Joe.

"Which is no easy matter. Silver Belt is as shrewd as a fox and knows just what he is doing."

"What has become of Don Ignace?"

"We left him in the house, guarded by Olive and Fred."

But, at that moment Fred Fuller made his appearance on the battle-field, and said that he had taken part in the fight.

Olive had been left alone with the bandit, and this was enough to send Merle and Fred back to the house without delay.

Olive met them on the porch with some startling information.

"I cut Don Ignace's bonds and let him go," confessed the young girl with a smile.

"Cut his bonds, did you?" cried Joe Bundy, coming up at that moment. "It should have been his throat!"

"But, he begged so piteously that I could not resist him," answered Olive. "Besides, he ask-

ed my forgiveness and promised never to cross my path again."

"Woman will have her way and you can't stop her," concluded the Yankee scout. "I guess the last of the Bundys will never take unto himself a wife, for he wouldn't be able to manage her if he did; thar!"

Olive laughed and shook her finger at the heroic old fellow.

Three weeks after the fight in front of the ranch a horseman rode slowly through a valley not far off. He was handsome, and sat his steed like a true rider.

No second look was required to decide that he was the renowned Captain Silver Belt and the manner in which he looked at everything told that he was on the alert.

But, unseen, among the shadows of the trees lurked a dark-skinned youth and his inseparable companion.

Silver Belt rode nearly across the valley before he saw anything startling; then he was surprised by a man who sprung into his pathway and covered him with a Winchester.

"The infernal Yankee!" growled he, looking at the man, who in truth was none other than old Joe Bundy.

"Old Joe an' pard," announced that worthy, as a figure arose at his side and Red Hawk stood in the trail. "We will just take a closer look at you, captain—"

"You will, eh?" and the hunted bandit suddenly fell forward on his steed's neck and the animal wheeled and started off.

But the rifle of the old scout leaped to his shoulder; a loud report broke the stillness; the bandit's horse came to a stand, and the figure of Captain Silver Belt swayed in the saddle.

He did not fall to the ground, but, spurring the horse viciously it leaped onward again.

Red Hawk had sprung upon his own steed, concealed in the copse and was now tearing after the bandit.

Silver Belt saw him coming, and with the desperateness of a wounded man brought to bay he gripped his six-shooter.

It was to be the settlement of an old score, for the red ally of Mesquite had given the brigand a deal of trouble.

As the Apache boy chief came on, Silver Belt covered the young red-skin and fired.

Red Hawk toppled, but not from his horse, for in a moment he was righted again and came down on the charge.

Again the bandit's pistol spoke, but with a curse he threw the weapon from him.

Twice he had missed the daring Apache youth.

Joe Bundy saw Red Hawk swoop upon the bandit like an eagle; he saw the hand of the young Indian seize the wounded captain and hold him fast.

There was a brief struggle, and when old Joe came up the raider of the plains was a captive.

Back over the road to Mesquite went Captain Silver Belt and his captors.

Merle resolved to hand his old enemy over to the United States authorities for trial as he had broken the laws; so Silver Belt was escorted to the nearest fort, where, in a short time, he was tried and publicly executed for the blackest crime on the calendar.

Mustang Merle's fight for life had ended in victory and with Captain Silver Belt out of the way, and Don Ignace frightened out of the country, he could look forward to pleasant times on the old ranch.

In course of time his pretty cousin Olive became Fred Fuller's bride, and Old Joe and Red Hawk received more than the thanks of the Boy Rancher for their great services.

Chipita, the Outcast Border Queen, was hunted no longer by the Black Feathers, for that organization ceased to exist after the battle at the ranch, and she came to live on the estate, where she is to-day.

Now and then the brand of the Crossed Daggers is to be seen on the frontier, but the band of Captain Silver Belt is no longer a terror to the prosperous ranches and the wary cowboys.

Jack Jordan never turned up after the fight at the ranch.

THE END.

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